

News Release



U.S. Department of Labor
Office of Public Affairs
Washington, D.C.
Release Number: 10-1754-NAT

For Immediate Release
Dec. 16, 2010
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MSHA increases focus on implementation of exposure monitoring at metal and nonmetal mines

Operators play important role to ensure miners not overexposed to harmful contaminants

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration today announced an increased focus on exposure monitoring at metal and nonmetal mines throughout the country to ensure better worker protection from overexposure to harmful airborne contaminants. Agency efforts will include stakeholder outreach, education and training, and enhanced implementation of existing standards. In particular, MSHA will focus on 30 Code of Federal Regulations 56.5002 and 57.5002, which require mine operators to conduct dust, gas, mist and fume surveys for harmful airborne contaminants’ fumes to determine the adequacy of control measures. A stakeholder briefing was held today at MSHA headquarters in Arlington, Va., to outline the initiative aimed at reducing illnesses and diseases due to such overexposures, and explain MSHA’s enforcement approach on complying with the standards.

“We want to ensure that miners are protected from overexposure to harmful contaminants and mine operators have required safety and health programs in place to meet that objective,” said Joseph A. Main, assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health.

“A number of diseases and illnesses can be caused by overexposure to harmful airborne contaminants, including lead poisoning, nervous system damage, lung cancer, asbestosis, lung inflammation and scarring, bronchitis and metal fume fever,” said Dr. Gregory Wagner, deputy assistant secretary for mine safety and health. “Some health conditions can take a long time to develop and may not be apparent at the time of exposure. Exposure monitoring programs to identify unhealthful levels of contaminants are critical to disease prevention.”

In a program policy letter issued in October, MSHA reiterated that mine operators have the primary responsibility for protecting the health of miners and must demonstrate compliance rather than rely on enforcement interventions. By conducting surveys in the workplace to determine the adequacy of exposure controls, miners are much less likely to be affected by the hazardous materials they encounter at work.

“This is a first step that includes a wide variety of industry stakeholder outreach, education, development of training programs and enhanced enforcement of existing standards,” said Main. “We will be working closely with the mining community, national and state mining associations, labor organizations, MSHA’s Small Mines Office and others to implement this initiative. Ultimately, the goal is improved health protection for metal and nonmetal miners, and help for all mine operators to better understand and meet the requirements of this standard.”

A procedure instruction letter has been issued to provide mine inspectors instructions on determining compliance with MSHA’s standards for surface and underground metal and nonmetal mines pertaining to surveys for airborne contaminants required under 30 C.F.R. 56.5002 and 57.5002., available at <http://www.msha.gov/regs/complian/PILS/2010/PIL10-IV-01.asp>. Mine operator assistance in planning and implementing a system to conduct surveys to determine the adequacy of control measures is available at www.msha.gov/S&HINFO/ExposureGuidance/ExposureGuidance.asp.

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