

OSHA Tightens Rules On Worker Hazards

Exposure to Nearly 400 Materials Targeted

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The Reagan administration, in one of the most sweeping regulatory actions in the history of federal safety law, yesterday issued new exposure standards for nearly 400 hazardous materials used in workplaces ranging from the corner dry cleaners to giant industrial plants.

The standards are the first overhaul of the exposure standards since passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act 17 years ago. John Pendergrass, assistant secretary of labor for OSHA, called the standards "a 20-year technological leap."

The standards will cover 21 million workers in "general industry" and involve hazardous materials such as carbon monoxide, chloroform and wood and grain dust. The new regulations tighten the standards on 212 hazardous substances

and add 164 substances not previously regulated by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. The Labor Department estimated employers would have to pay an average of \$150 per worker to comply with the new standards.

OSHA plans to extend the new standards to the construction and maritime industries as soon as the appropriate regulatory procedures are completed.

The regulations go into effect March 1. Employers have to be in compliance by September, but until 1992 they can do it through the use of respirators and other such protective equipment. Beginning in 1992, however, they must change their production equipment.

Employers in Virginia and Maryland will have to comply with the new federal standards and timetables even though they are covered by state, rather than federal, safety

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plans. The Labor Department said the regulations apply to all states with OSHA-approved plans.

In the past, OSHA has attempted to develop permissible exposure limits for toxic chemicals on a case-by-case basis. Yesterday's an-

nouncement establishes the precedent for sweeping change in a single regulatory action.

By taking the broad approach, Pendergrass said, "we were able to make a 20-year leap forward in the level of worker protection in a relatively short time." OSHA has been working on the standards, which

had to be approved by the Office of Management and Budget, for two years.

Since its creation in 1971, OSHA has only produced comprehensive standards for 24 substances. The rest of the government's safety regulations were so-called "consensus standards" voluntarily adopted by industry in 1968 before OSHA was enacted. The action yesterday was the first time the consensus standards have been changed.

Pendergrass said the broad approach to regulation also saved the taxpayers "tens of millions of dollars that otherwise would have been spent over a long period of time in individual rulemakings on updating the exposure limits for each substance."

For an administration noted for its dedication to paper-work reduction, however, the OSHA action may set of standard of a different sort. The regulations are 2,100 pages long and will have to be printed in the Federal Register over a period of several days.

Labor and business reacted to the new exposure limits with caution.

Margaret Seminario, safety director for the AFL-CIO, said the regulations are "better than what exists right now, but it's not all that needs to be done to protect workers." She said she is concerned that the government had "adopted a set of standards that industry can live with," and that the labor federation plans on studying the new standards

and pushing OSHA to make some of them tougher.

Susan Spangler, director of risk management for the National Association of Manufacturers, said the organization had not decided what, if any, action it should take regarding the new standards. "The manufacturing community has always supported OSHA's effort to review the permissible exposure limits, but we haven't had a chance to review the new standards."

Spangler said there was some concern at the manufacturers group about the "lump sum" approach that OSHA took. "We're concerned about the precedent they're setting," she said.

By taking such a sweeping approach, OSHA has held both labor and management somewhat at bay, since neither side is likely to attack the entire package for the sake of a single standard. Spangler noted, for example, that she could not recall a single OSHA standard that was not challenged by someone during the process of drawing up the regulations.

If there is an immediate challenge, it could come from the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. ACTWU President Jack Sheinkman said the new standards are "merely a rubber-stamping of the chemical industry's own recommendations." Sheinkman said the new standard for the cleaning solvent perchloroethylene, which is used in dry cleaning, is "unacceptable" because it would still expose workers to cancer-causing hazards.