

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/business/1310AP_Chromium_Health.html

Monday, February 27, 2006 · Last updated 3:30 p.m. PT

OSHA issues new rule on chromium

By H. JOSEF HEBERT
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WASHINGTON -- The Labor Department reduced the acceptable levels of workplace exposure Monday to a cancer-causing metal, hexavalent chromium, but critics said the new standard still leaves thousands of workers at risk.

The new rule limits worker exposure to the carcinogenic metal to no more than 5 micrograms per cubic meter of air, a large reduction from the old standard, but also a level five times higher than what had been proposed by the agency two years ago.

The old standard, issued in 1971, was 52 micrograms per cubic meter of air.

Hexavalent chromium is used in chrome plating, stainless steel welding and the production of chromate pigments and dyes. An estimated 558,000 workers, from welders and steelworkers to jewelers, are exposed to its airborne particles that have been linked to lung cancer.

The new requirement "substantially reduces the significant health risks" for employees exposed to the material, said Jonathan Snare, acting assistant secretary for occupational safety and health at the department, in a statement.

In a conference call with reporters, Snare said the 5 microgram permissible exposure level, or PEL, "is the lowest level that is feasible both technologically and economically." He said the standard would cost industry \$282 million a year to implement.

He said it would result in the avoidance of 100 to 145 cancers a year among the nearly 67,000 workers that currently are exposed to airborne levels of hexavalent chromium of more than 5 micrograms. About 88 percent of the workers are in workplaces where airborne levels already meet or exceed the new standard.

"We understand and acknowledge there is remaining significant risk at the new PEL," said Snare.

The department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which is issuing the standard under a court order, estimated that the 5 microgram standard would result in 10 to 45 additional cancers over a lifetime for every 1,000 workers exposed, compared to 2.1 to 9.1 additional cancers per 1,000 workers

under a 1 microgram standard.

"This represents clearly significant additional risks to workers," said Peter Lurie, deputy director of Public Citizens' Health Research Group, the private advocacy group that sued to force OSHA to issue a new standard.

"This agency had to be sued in order to issue anything. Now they will have to be sued again to do something that adequately protects American workers," said Lurie in an interview.

Public Citizen and unions representing workers in some of the industries involved maintain that airborne levels of hexavalent chromium should be kept at no more than 0.25 micrograms per cubic meter of air to assure adequate safety. They also argue the technology and economic cost issue can be resolved by dealing with various industries separately.

A study conducted by a group of George Washington University researchers and released last week by Public Citizen claimed the chromium industry withheld from OSHA key data on the health risks posed by hexavalent chromium. It said industry groups gave OSHA selected data suggesting only the highest level of exposure led to significantly higher risk of lung cancer deaths.

Officials from the Specialty Steel Industry of America, a primary industry group, did not return telephone calls for comment on the new OSHA standard.

An attorney for the trade group Chrome Coalition, Kate McMahon, said last week the industry had not manipulated data. Instead, part of a study it commissioned was never sent to OSHA because it was not peer reviewed and then was overlooked when the company coordinating the research went bankrupt.

Snare said Monday that the recent report by researchers at the George Washington University's School of Public Health and Health Services had been taken into consideration, but "did not add additional information" that would have affected the agency's risk assessment.

David Michaels, author of the report, called the OSHA standard "weak" and said it would "leave a large number of workers dangerously exposed to carcinogens."

"The chromium industry was able to convince the White House to weaken the standard across the board, so science went out the window," Michaels said.

On the Net:

The GW study can be found at: <http://www.DefendingScience.org>

OSHA: <http://www.osha.gov>

Public Citizen: <http://www.citizen.org>