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Unions urge federal safeguards against "popcorn workers lung"

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Associated Press

SPRINGFIELD, Mo. - Workers in food factories nationwide need immediate government protection from a flavoring chemical blamed for a debilitating lung disease and used in products from microwave popcorn to dog food, labor unions and physicians said Wednesday.

Two of the largest U.S. unions and a group of doctors petitioned the U.S. Department of Labor to issue an emergency order to reduce factory exposure to diacetyl, a flavoring that sparked a 2001 lawsuit by 30 popcorn plant workers in Jasper, who alleged that inhaling the chemical ravaged their lungs.

The Teamsters and the United Food and Commercial Workers said an emergency order is needed from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration because the health threat is proven and it could take years to develop a permanent standard for exposure.

"Workers exposed to diacetyl are at continuing high risk for a severe, irreversible, and potentially fatal respiratory disease, called bronchiolitis obliterans, because there are no enforceable OSHA standards requiring exposures to be controlled," the unions said in a petition to Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao.

The disease is often called "popcorn workers lung" but affects an unknown number of people who work in other food-processing plants where the flavoring is used, the unions said.

The industry group Flavor and Extract Manufacturers Association said it was reviewing the unions' statement and that it "supports any action based on sound science."

An emergency order could set standards for low exposure that would require companies to improve ventilation and equip and train workers to use respirators, the union said in a conference call with reporters.

The unions accused OSHA of doing nothing even though the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, an arm of the Centers for Disease Control, had published research as far back as 2004 showing a link between diacetyl and lung disease.

OSHA said it had distributed educational brochures to popcorn makers starting in 2002. The brochures include suggestions for better ventilation and the use of respirators for workers, said Ruth McCully, head of the agency's directorate for science, technology and medicine.

McCully said OSHA would study the union petition. But she said it was not clear yet if lung problems were linked solely to diacetyl or to other flavoring chemicals.

"We don't know if diacetyl is the agent (causing lung disease). When you get into the world of flavorings, there are so many flavorings it's difficult to determine which chemicals are the causative agent," McCully told The Associated Press.

A group of 40 physicians and health experts who signed a letter backing the union petition said there was enough research to act on.

"There is compelling scientific evidence that diacetyl causes terrible lung disease. OSHA has done nothing," said Dr. David Michaels from the George Washington University School of Public Health, a signatory of the letter who was also on the conference call.

"We know how to stop it. There's no reason for another person to get sick," said Dr. Allen Parmet, a Kansas City occupational physician who diagnosed the first Jasper lung cases in 2000. Parmet also signed the letter and was on the conference call.

Ed Pennell, one of the Jasper popcorn workers who filed suit and has since settled out of court for an undisclosed amount, said he and his fellow workers have been waiting for years for regulators to take action.

"We figured that as a result of the suit, something would be done about it, the government would take some action. But none of that has come about yet," Pennell told reporters on the conference call.

"Basically my lungs are shot," said Pennell, adding he is on a waiting list for a lung transplant.

Michaels also urged the Environmental Protection Agency to release a study originally due out in late 2003 on home use of microwave popcorn. He said it could show whether vapors from microwaving bags at home posed a similar risk from inhaling diacetyl as workplace exposure.

But an EPA spokeswoman said the study is aimed only at finding out whether popping and opening microwave popcorn causes any emissions, of diacetyl or any other gases.

"It is not a health effects study," spokeswoman Suzanne Ackerman said, adding it should be ready for publication late this year.

ON THE NET

United Food and Commercial Workers: <http://www.ufcw.org>

International Brotherhood of Teamsters: <http://www.teamster.org>

Defending Science (scientists backing union petition): <http://www.DefendingScience.org>

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

Flavor and Extract Manufacturers Association: <http://www.femaflavor.org>

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