

U.S. Tightens Rules on Cancer-Causing Chromium
By Joi Preciphs, The Wall Street Journal, 431 words

Feb 28, 2006

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WASHINGTON -- Federal regulators set a stricter new standard for worker exposure to hexavalent chromium, a cancer-causing metal that is a hazard in the steelworking, welding and jewelry trades.

The action comes after a federal appeals court had ordered the government to act in 2003. Dissatisfied activists, however, threaten further legal action.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration said that effective today it would lower its permissible workplace exposure limit to hexavalent chromium and all related compounds to five micrograms per cubic meter of air from 52 micrograms, the standard set in 1971. An earlier proposal would have reduced it further, but that was ultimately rejected.

Hexavalent chromium -- used to produce chromate pigments and dyes and in stainless-steel welding and chrome plating -- can cause lung cancer, nasal-septum ulcerations and perforations, skin ulcers and allergic and irritant contact dermatitis. Under the new five-microgram standard, OSHA said an estimated 10 to 45 workers per 1,000 could develop lung cancer over a lifetime of exposure, compared with 2.1 to 9.1 cancers per 1,000 workers under a one-microgram standard that had been suggested. Even so, OSHA officials said that under the new standard 100 to 145 cancers a year would be avoided among the estimated 67,000 workers currently exposed to airborne hexavalent chromium beyond five micrograms.

The agency estimates the new standard will cost the industry \$282 million a year. Companies have 180 days from the effective date of the standard, or by November 2006, to comply with its provisions, except for engineering controls. Companies with 20 employees or less have a full year from the effective date to put the changes into effect.

The rule-making change comes on the heels of a recent report in Environmental Health by Public Citizen and George Washington University's School of Public Health saying the chromium industry held back data about chromium-exposure risks and lung cancer from the agency during its rule-making investigation. Without the information, representatives from both groups say OSHA, a division of the Labor Department, has set a benchmark that continues to jeopardize the estimated 558,000 people exposed to the metal in the workplace.

Although conceding a "significant risk" exists at the new level, OSHA's acting assistant secretary for occupational safety, Jonathan L. Snare, said the agency has developed a standard that "substantially reduces the significant health risks" for occupational exposure to the metal and includes stronger provisions for exposure control, respiratory protection, protective clothing and equipment, hygiene, medical surveillance, hazard communication and record keeping. Mr. Snare said the new standard is set at the "lowest level that is feasible, both technologically and economically."