



Comprehensive Silica Health Standard Coming Soon, OSHA's Chief Says

Assistant Secretary Michaels told AIHce 2011 attendees March 18 the proposal will be issued "in the next few months."

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PORTLAND, Ore. — In a speech that included a film clip of U.S. Labor Secretary Frances Perkins calling on employers to prevent silica exposures, OSHA Assistant Secretary Dr. David Michaels told attendees of AIHce 2011 that his agency soon will propose a comprehensive silica health standard. Michaels asked them to comment on the proposal, which he promised will solve OSHA's currently conflicting Permissible Exposure Limits for silica.

Silica exposure has long been associated with silicosis, a potentially fatal disease, but recent research indicates it is also linked with lung cancer, Michaels said. The film clip showed Perkins, who was labor secretary during the administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, releasing a thick report on silica hazards and expressing confidence that silicosis could be prevented.

Michaels also told the audience that OSHA will issue a Globally Harmonized System (GHS) proposed standard in August 2011 and is making progress on the Injury and Illness Prevention Programs standard, known as I2P2. "We think employers should be implementing an injury and illness prevention program, whether or not we have a standard," said Michaels, adding that OSHA soon will publish and post white papers about enforcement and other I2P2 issues to help employers understand it better.

"This has been in many ways the most exciting time in my career," said Michaels, Ph.D, an epidemiologist before he accepted the OSHA position. He displayed a chart showing how sharply the U.S. private-sector fatality rate has fallen since OSHA's creation in 1971 and said, "We've saved thousands and thousands of lives. We've prevented many injuries. . . . It's not that OSHA alone has done it; we've done it together." The fatality rate per 100,000 U.S. workers was 18 in 1970 and was 3.5 in 2009, when about 4,300 workers died on the job, according to Michaels and his chart. "It's still too many, but we've made great progress," he said.