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# **OSHA's Silica Standard**

After a decade and a half of development, OSHA is reviewing comments and planning to issue the final rule for occupational exposure to crystalline silica (also known as silica dust) in February 2016, almost two-and-a-half years after proposing the final rule in September 2013. The current version of the rule sets a permissible exposure limit ("PEL") for respirable crystalline silica of 50 micrograms per cubic meter of air calculated as an eight hour time weighted average. This PEL is lower than the current PEL for general industry (100 micrograms) and significantly lower than the current PEL for construction and ship yards (250 micrograms). The Mine Safety and Health Administration is also planning on applying OSHA's proposed standard to airborne silica in mines.

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health ("NIOSH") and the Centers for Disease Control ("CDC"), at least 1.7 million workers in this country are exposed to respirable crystalline silica in a variety of industries and occupations, including construction, sandblasting and mining.[1] Although the most severe exposures to crystalline silica result from abrasive blasting, exposures also occur in the tool and die, steel and foundry industries, and in the manufacturing of cement, brick, asphalt pavement, china and ceramic.[2]

Occupational exposures to respirable crystalline silica are associated with the development of silicosis, which occurs when silica dust enters the lungs and causes scar tissue to form, thus reducing the lungs' ability to take in oxygen. Such exposures may also result in lung cancer, pulmonary tuberculosis and airways diseases and may also be related to the development of autoimmune disorders, chronic renal disease and other adverse health effects.[3]

Consequently, OSHA is intent on finalizing this rule in order to address the health threat posed to U.S. workers by silica dust, despite protests from the private sector. In particular, the construction industry has labeled it the most expensive workplace safety rule ever and commented that compliance will be impossible. Clearly, observers from all sectors will be carefully watching this rule and its effects in the coming months and years.

[1] See <a href="http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/silica/">http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/silica/</a>.

# [2] See

https://www.osha.gov/OshDoc/data\_General\_Facts/crystalline-factsheet.pdf.

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## [3] See <a href="http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/silica/">http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/silica/</a>.

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