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News Release

U.S. Department of Labor

OSHA News Release: 12-1274-NAT**June 21, 2012****Contact: Jesse Lawder Egan Reich****Phone: 202-693-4659 202-693-4960****Email: lawder.jesse@dol.gov reich.egan.2@dol.gov**

OSHA and NIOSH issue hazard alert on ensuring workers in hydraulic fracturing operations have appropriate protections from silica exposure

WASHINGTON – The U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health today issued a hazard alert on ensuring that employers in hydraulic fracturing operations take appropriate steps to protect workers from silica exposure. Today's action, which is taken after consultation with stakeholders, including industry, meets the Obama administration's focus on ensuring that this important resource continues to be developed safely and responsibly.

The hazard alert follows a cooperative study by NIOSH and industry partners that identified overexposure to silica as a health hazard to workers conducting hydraulic fracturing operations.

As noted in the alert, respirable silica is a hazard common to many industries and industrial processes. Because large quantities of silica sand are used during hydraulic fracturing, NIOSH began a cooperative effort in January 2010 to collect data regarding silica exposure at hydraulic fracturing operations. NIOSH worked in cooperation with oil and gas industry partners to sample the air at 11 sites in five states where hydraulic fracturing operations were taking place. NIOSH identified seven primary sources of silica dust exposure during fracturing operations and found that workers downwind of sand mover and blender operations, especially during hot loading, had the highest silica exposures.

Workers who breathe silica day after day are at greater risk of developing silicosis, a disease in which lung tissue reacts to trapped silica particles, causing inflammation and scarring, and reducing the lungs' ability to take in oxygen. Silica also can cause lung cancer and has been linked to other diseases, such as tuberculosis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and kidney and autoimmune disease.

Today's action responds to the NIOSH findings. The alert states that employers must ensure that workers are properly protected from overexposure to silica. The alert describes how a combination of engineering controls, work practices, protective equipment and product substitution, where feasible, along with worker training, can protect workers who are exposed to silica. Engineering controls and work practices provide the best protection for workers. According to the alert, transporting, moving and refilling silica sand into and through sand movers, and along transfer belts and into blender hoppers, can release dust into the air containing up to 99 percent silica that workers breathe.

"Hazardous exposures to silica can and must be prevented. It is important for employers and workers to understand the hazards associated with silica exposure in hydraulic fracturing operations and how to protect workers," said Dr. David Michaels, assistant secretary of labor for occupational safety and health. "OSHA and NIOSH are committed to continuing to work with the industry and workers to find effective solutions to address these hazards."

"Through partnerships, both businesses and safety professionals are able to collaborate on assessing and managing occupational safety and health risks," said NIOSH Director John Howard, M.D. "The recommendations for protecting workers in the hazard alert are practical, evidence-based and effective solutions to help support the safe growth of American-made energy."

"We applaud the efforts of the NIOSH NORA Council for Oil and Gas Extraction, OSHA and our partners from industry for helping to raise awareness of this hazard," said Kenny Jordan, executive director of the Association of Energy Service Companies. "We are proud of the development of an industry focus group in cooperation with those agencies which will further explore this issue, share best practices and continue to build upon the many engineering controls currently in place and those under development over the last several years. The safety and health of our workforce is a top priority, and the industry strives to follow and improve best practices for safe operations and works closely with OSHA and NIOSH to help ensure a strong culture of safety. We look forward to sharing improvements not only within our industry, but with others as well."

AFL-CIO Health and Safety Director Margaret Seminario stated, "The AFL-CIO strongly supports this hazard alert that provides important information to employers and workers involved in hydraulic fracturing operations regarding the serious health threat from silica exposures. It is critical that OSHA and NIOSH disseminate this information, so that immediate action can be taken to protect workers from silicosis and other silica-related diseases."

The hazard alert can be viewed at http://www.osha.gov/dts/hazardalerts/hydraulic_frac_hazard_alert.html.

Under the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, employers are responsible for providing safe and healthful workplaces for their employees. OSHA's role is to ensure these conditions for America's working men and women by setting and enforcing standards, and providing training, education and assistance. For more information, visit <http://www.osha.gov>.

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