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Lowering Miners' Exposure to Respirable Crystalline Silica and Improving Respiratory Protection

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Lowering Miners' Exposure: Respirable Crystalline Silica and Improving Respiratory Protection

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Comment from Niemand, William

Submitter Information

Name: William Niemand

Address:

Downey, CA, 90241-2701

Email: Wdniemand@yahoo.com

Phone: (562)637-5961

General Comment

Black lung is incurable but totally preventable. Why, then, has this 100 percent-preventable disease come roaring back? Because the government's safety standards — which rely in part on coal companies to police themselves — haven't kept up with the latest working conditions in mines and don't sufficiently limit exposure to the biggest hazard of all: silica.

I commend the Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration proposed rule that would reduce the allowable silica dust levels to the same threshold used in every other U.S. industry, but even those regulations need to be strengthened before they become final this November. Not just coal workers, but also metal, sand, stone and gravel miners are also at risk. All miners need protection.

Silica dust is found in higher concentrations in Appalachian coal mines than in any other U.S. mines. That's because as the more accessible, larger coal seams have been exploited, miners have been sent to small seams buried deeper inside mountains. Getting to these seams and extracting the coal often means pulverizing huge quantities of rock containing silica.

Unfortunately mining companies might interpret the current language, which governs "typical mining activities," to exclude mining construction, during which silica exposure can be highest. Instead of using vague language about typical activities, the Mine Safety and Health Administration needs to specifically require periodic testing during all phases of a mine's construction and operation.

The proposal also states that when silica levels are dangerously high, miners must use respirators — not N95s but the kinds of masks that cover most of the face with rubber and plastic—until employers can figure out how to fix the dust problem. Any miner will tell you that

wearing a respirator in a hot, loud, confined space while sweating through eight-hour or longer shifts of intense manual labor is just not possible. Preventing explosions and keeping walls from caving in require constant communication in a way that's difficult when everyone's wearing those masks. The real solution is for mining companies to ventilate the mines or capture or eliminate dust.

Of course, safety regulations are useful only if they're followed and enforced. If we continue to rely on mining companies to do their own dust sampling without adequate enforcement, black lung deaths will almost certainly continue to climb.

Countless miners have shared stories of employers' hiding evidence of dangerous conditions. Regulators need to be more explicit about how they will stop these dishonest and dangerous practices. New rules should include unannounced inspections, fines and the suspension of work for mine operators who don't fix problems. Black lung is incurable but totally preventable.

Mining, whether for coal or for exotic materials used in advanced electric batteries, is not going away. Let's make sure that the U.S. shows the world how to do it safely.