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

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Comment from Robinson, John

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General Comment

My name is John Robinson.

I plan to speak on my experiences working in coal mines in southwest Virginia and eastern Kentucky. I have worked as an underground coal miner and on slope mines for over 28 years. I have worked all positions in the mines - roof bolter, shuttle car, scoop, pretty much anything there.

In 2014, at the age of 47, I was diagnosed with simple pneumoconiosis at category 2, possibly category 3.

Reducing the PEL is important to keeping our younger generation of coal miners safe. But regulations won't be enough until there is some honesty. Honesty with samples. Honesty with masks and respirators. Honesty with how bad this epidemic truly is.

I have worn several different types of masks while mining, anything that could keep me safe in my job, but I'm here to tell you it's difficult to do. We're just now finding out that the masks we wore weren't filtering out what they were supposed to. They're failing us. When you are in 40 inches of coal, and you're hunched over, the masks don't work too well. The heat and the sweat make it almost impossible to breathe. Your body suffers from the physical labor of the job. Neck surgeries, back surgeries, knee and shoulder surgeries, it adds up over time. You struggle to breathe when dust is all around you, but you've got everything else now making your job even tougher. It feels like a pillow is over your face but you can't get it off.

In my time in the mines, I have worn personal dust monitors and have seen what operators do when inspectors visit. I want these companies to do better and I don't want them to shut down,

but if you look at production numbers on days when inspectors visit and when they don't, you can tell they're gaming the system.

To keep it honest, both operators and MSHA inspectors should conduct quarterly samples. Operators don't want to be over their limit, but they know how to keep miners afraid of speaking out. These are good-paying jobs and no one wants to lose them. We've got families to take care of and support, and in many places down here you don't have any other work. There needs to be a way to keep our younger miners safe and keep businesses open without risking the next generation's health.

The shortage of MSHA inspectors makes this even tougher. In my experience, MSHA would run samples on everyone, and sometimes they would just sample one group or another, but the thing about it is the only way for inspectors to see what goes on in these mines is if they were with them their entire shifts, and that's impossible. And what happens when the inspectors leave? No one wants to be honest about what's happening and if they were, we wouldn't have an epidemic of black lung right now.

Near the end of my time as a miner, I cut about 3400 feet of slope for about two years. That was the third slope I had cut and it was just straight silica all day. They couldn't run dust pumps and we cut through solid rock to get to the coal seam. But because we hadn't hit coal yet, it wasn't considered a coal mine. That's when my health really began to decline, and in those years, I don't remember them doing any dust samples at all.

I want this rule to be done right. I want the company and inspectors to do this right and protect our miners. We old timers have already paid the price, we're gonna die from this preventable disease. But we have got to take care of our younger guys. There's always room for improvement and you should always do better. You'll never eliminate 100% of the dust because you can't pull out what you can't even see, but until we have a rule in place that protects our miners, keeps them employed, and eliminates the fear of retaliation from these operators, it won't be enough.