

The Nicholas County Black Lung Association meets monthly at city hall in Summersville, West Virginia. We are grateful that MSHA is finally taking action to make coal companies reduce silica and rock dust in mines and we appreciate the opportunity to submit a comment on behalf of the chapter and our miners, benefits advocates, and family members.

The best time to reduce the silica standard to 50 micrograms would have been 50 years ago. But the next best time is now. Members in our chapter, who worked in the mines throughout the 70s, 80s, 90s, and 2000s, were often cutting through feet of rock. If it was that bad for us, it is even worse for miners now who are cutting through even more rock to get to the smaller coal because all of the good coal is gone. Now miners are drilling through rock that in the past we would bypass.

It's important to get this rule right. Miners today shouldn't have to end up like those of us in the black lung association.

But we worry that the rule won't go as far as it needs to really save lives. If you give coal companies any wiggle room, they'll find that room, and even more. Everyone says this is like letting the fox watch the henhouse. MSHA has to be at the mines more often to sample silica dust, and while they're there, inspect other parts of mines for safety violations. If you let companies sample themselves, you might as well throw out the results. We've seen bosses take monitors right off a miner and keep it away from dust.

We all know they fudge data. It's just not cracked down on like it should be. That's why us in the black lung association chapter are in the state that we are in right now.

You've got to have continuous monitoring in the mines for silica dust. You have to have a machine that is constantly checking people, especially the continuous machine operators and roofbolters. They are around too much dust and everyone knows it.

Coal companies and bosses don't care about the workers, the only thing they care about is coal and getting money. They don't care about their men one bit. "Production first, safety last" is what we all knew.

Don't let coal companies rely on respirators as a way to keep miners safe. Some of our chapter's members wore respirators all the time, and got black lung disease anyway. And it's going to be hard to make sure they're working as well as they could anyway when workers are down in the mines. If you let operators send miners underground when dust levels are high, that means it'll be so dark and clouded that respirators will fog up our goggles and make it hard for us to keep each other safe. You've got to pull

miners out when silica dust levels get too high. But if you're not requiring continuous, or even frequent sampling, how would miners know they're working in dangerous dust levels?

We had our time in the mines. Living with black lung is terrible for us and our families. But we're not afraid to speak up for ourselves, and especially for the guys who are still down in the mines. We had our jobs threatened if we didn't fudge the data like bosses wanted. One miner was even fired for not falsifying data, although it's common knowledge that they'll say the firing was for a different reason.

That's why you can't trust them to sample themselves now for something so serious. Don't put today's miners, who are getting black lung younger than we did, in the same danger that we were in.

Thank you again for taking action on lowering the standard to 50 micrograms. But MSHA has to sample them, and it has to be a surprise, because they'll make it look like everything alright if they even get a short heads up.