

Tripartite group could resolve worker environment standards – MinEx

Bernie Napp - Fri, 2 Oct 2020



[1]

MinEx is proposing that a grouping of industry, unions and WorkSafe be formed to resolve concerns over the implementation of new “worker environment standards” for harmful minerals and chemicals.

Wayne Scott, MinEx chief executive, says the idea stems from the latest round of submissions on WorkSafe’s proposed new WES, which MinEx is once again opposing.

“WorkSafe is repeating the same approach it took a year ago with [respirable crystalline silica](#) [2], reducing allowable levels below what can accurately be measured,” he says.

At the time, occupational hygienists recommended against lowering the respirable crystalline silica WES because operators would spend more time arguing over the results instead of mitigating exposure.

Unimplementable arsenic levels

Inside Resources has previously reported on [the impossibility](#) [3] of measuring the new lower concentration thresholds for elements such as arsenic, raising the question of how to enforce the new standards.

WorkSafe is testing a move lower for the arsenic WES from 0.05 milligram in a cubic metre of air to 0.001mg/m³, and to reduce the corresponding Biological Exposure Index from 35 micrograms per litre to 10µg/l of urine sample.

“Another risk of having very low and potentially unmeasurable limits is that they are just ignored,” Scott says.

“As for the BEI arsenic level, the problem is it’s below the natural levels of arsenic that about half the population can have at any one time.”

He says smokers are one group likely to fail any new BEI test for arsenic, as well as anyone who has eaten seafood in the previous couple of days.

“The proposed WES of 0.001mg/m³ is significantly lower than any other jurisdiction in the world, including those with considerably more data and analysis of occupational exposure impacts,” Scott says.

Safe Work Australia is recommending an eight-hour time-weighted average exposure of 0.01mg/m³, ten times higher than the proposed New Zealand WES.

Unimplementable chromium VI levels

Scott also cites a similar problem with chromium VI. Worker exposure to this form of chromium can occur during welding of stainless steel and other alloy steels containing chromium. Chromium VI compounds are used as pigments in dyes, paints, inks, and plastics, and as an anticorrosive agent in paints, primers and other surface coatings.

WorkSafe's proposal is to reduce the WES for chromium VI from 0.01 milligram per cubic metre currently to 0.00002mg/m³.

This is a level for which WorkSafe itself has said "there are no available analytical methods that would allow determination of airborne levels of chromium VI at the proposed WES values."

Other comment

MinEx Board chair Chris Baker says WorkSafe is adopting "stretch targets" rather than those which are able to be monitored and enforced with today's knowledge and technology.

"That would work if we couple those stretch targets with a programme of improvement that is pragmatic and achievable."

Fiona Bartier, Bathurst Resources' general manager health, safety and environment, says the new WorkSafe limits show a focus on the numbers rather than the risk controls.

"It's preferable that there is a key focus on worker engagement and education around the use of appropriate risk controls rather than enforcement of levels we cannot measure," Bartier says.

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