ASBESTOS STANDARDS:

Effective Next Month

The new standards for employee exposure to asbestos dust finds most contractors, manufacturers ready for the July 1, 1976 date

The wall and ceiling contracting industry is pretty much prepared as the new standard for employee exposure to asbestos dust goes into effect July 1, 1976.

That’s the date when concentrations will be limited to 2 fibers, which are longer than 5 micrometers, per cubic centimeter of air on an 8-hour time-weighted average.

Until the July 1 date, the current permissible time-weighted average concentration of 5 fibers of asbestos longer than 5 micrometers will be allowed, a standard that has been effective as an emergency temporary standard for more than three years.

The new standard also establishes a ceiling concentration of 10 fibers, not to be exceeded at any time.

For most wall and ceiling contractors, the new, lower standard for asbestos fiber concentration will represent little difficulty. Most of the major manufacturers of such products as joint compounds and spray texture products have already introduced asbestos-free products into their marketing streams.

Revisions Underway

Contractors should be forewarned, though, that efforts are now in process to lower the 2 fiber standard even lower. OSHA has proposed new asbestos rules—with construction specifically exempted—that call for an eight-hour time-weighted average of not more than 0.5 fibers per cubic centimeter for general industry.

At the same time, the asbestos subgroup for the Advisory Committee on Construction Safety and Health for exposure to asbestos in the construction industry is reviewing a second set of rules that the Advisory Committee recommended last September—and which apparently differ from the new revisions that OSHA has proposed for general industry.

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The Advisory Committee met last January and agreed to look at their construction recommendations in the light of the OSHA proposal. They planned to meet again within 60 to 90 days.

Hearings should be held sometime this month, so it is highly unlikely that any new revisions—whether containing a separate asbestos standard for construction and another for the rest of general industry, or a standard applicable to everyone—will have any effect on the July 1 standard.

So, as of July 1, contractors must comply with the standard calling for concentration limitations of 2 fibers.

Here are other provisions of the July 1, 1976, standard:

**Compliance Methods**

Feasible technological controls and appropriate work practices are required as the primary means of compliance. Rotation of employees to reduce their exposure is allowed only in "exceptional circumstances."

Personal protective equipment, such as respirators, cannot be relied upon, in large part because such devices are so uncomfortable as to be burdensome except for short periods.

The standard includes these other compliance requirements:

— Hand tools that may produce or release asbestos fibers in excess of the limits must be provided with local exhaust ventilation systems.

— Insofar as practical, asbestos must be handled, mixed, applied, removed, cut, scored or otherwise worked in a wet state to reduce fiber emissions unless this would diminish the usefulness of the product.

— No asbestos cement, mortar, coating, grout, plaster or similar material containing asbestos can be removed from shipping bags or other containers without being either wetted, enclosed or ventilated.

— Where respirators are permitted, they must be selected from among the types approved by MESA or NIOSH. Extensive details are given on types of respirators and conditions for their use. No employee may be assigned to a task requiring a respirator if a physician determines it would affect his job functioning or his health.

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**Monitoring**

Employers must establish monitoring systems to make certain every employee’s exposure to asbestos fibers is below the prescribed limits. If the limits are exceeded, the employer must undertake a compliance program.

Therefore, the standard also requires monitoring at intervals no longer than 6 months and gives employees or their representatives the opportunity to observe the monitoring and to have access to such records.

**Warning Signs**

Caution signs are to be displayed in areas where asbestos concentrations may exceed the exposure...
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limits. Caution labels must be affixed to all raw materials, mixtures, scrap, waste, debris and other products containing asbestos fibers, or to their containers.

However, no label is required where asbestos has been modified by a bonding agent, coating, binder or other material that would prevent release of above-limit concentrations.

Recordkeeping

Employers must maintain records of personal or environmental monitoring, keep them for at least 3 years, and make them available upon request to OSHA or NIOSH. Every current and former employee is given opportunity for reasonable access to any records indicating their exposure to asbestos dust.

Any employee found to have been exposed at any time to airborne concentrations in excess of the limits must be notified in writing no later than 5 days after the finding, and informed as to corrective action being taken.

Medical Examinations

The employer must provide, or make available at his cost, medical examinations. Within 30 days of an employee’s first employment in a job involving asbestos exposure, the employer must provide a comprehensive medical examination, including a chest X-Ray and pulmonary tests. At least annually, every employer shall provide or make available comprehensive medical examinations to employees in asbestos exposure areas. A similar examination is to be provided within 30 days before or after termination of employment.

Medical Records

Employers whose employees have been examined under the standard must maintain complete records of these examinations and retain them for at least 20 years. The contents of the records are to be made available for inspection and copying to the Assistant Secretary of Labor for OSHA, the Director of NIOSH, authorized physicians and medical consultants of either agency, and, upon request of an employee or former employee, to his physician.

Any physician who conducts an examination under the standard must furnish the employer all information required by the standard, and any other medical information related to occupational exposure to asbestos fibers.

Affected Employment

This general standard covers also employees in construction, ship repairing, shipbuilding, shipbreaking, and longshoring who normally are subject to construction and maritime standards.

All parts of this standard went into effect July 7, 1972, except for the reduction from 5 fibers to 2, which takes effect July 1, 1976.