

OSHA official explains recent noise policy politics (2/28)

by Dave Johnson



Posted: February 28, 2011

From the 36th Annual National Hearing Conservation Conference in Mesa, AZ, Feb. 24-26.

Nancy Hauter, director of national OSHA's health enforcement, spoke at the NHCA meeting on the most talked-about topic at the meeting: OSHA's proposal to reemphasize the use of engineering controls over PPE, and the subsequent withdrawal of that policy after more than 30 industry groups protested.

Hauter said OSHA proposed the new policy after research showed hearing loss to be a significant workplace health issue, with more than 20,000 workers annually experiencing hearing loss. Also, hearing expert Elliott Berger has written that only five percent of workers actually receive the noise reduction rating (NRR) protection their HPDs carry. And another statistic: only 34 percent of workers exposed to potentially harmful noise levels wear HPDs.

Armed with this evidence from inspections and investigations and research, OSHA proposed in 2010 to have employers use engineering controls to bring noise levels down below 90 dBA when feasible. OSHA's old policy in effect since the 1980s called for the use of controls only when noise exceeded 100 dBA. The new policy target noise exposures between 90 and 100 dBA.

Engineering controls constitute a wide range of options: full machinery enclosures, mufflers, sound blankets or curtains, dampeners, and particularly important according to OSHA's Hauter, routine maintenance on noisy equipment. She said engineering control solutions often can come in under \$100.

"We failed to educate the public on the reasons for the renewed emphasis on noise controls over PPE, so we pulled back for more education," said Hauter.

OSHA received "a very, very strong immediate reaction from the National Association of Manufacturers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce," along with almost 30 other industry groups. "We heard the same comments that we've heard since the 1970s," said Hauter. "You're going to ruin us, put us on the brink of bankruptcy."

Facing this level of protest, OSHA decided that more outreach and input from the public was needed, and withdrew the proposal. "Rest assured OSHA is not dropping this issue," said Hauter. The agency plans to update the noise section of its website in March with new information. Public hearings on the proposal will be held, hopefully this spring or summer, according to Hauter. And she said OSHA

chief Dr. David Michaels is making the case that American industry is losing business to European manufacturers of "quiet equipment," because engineering controls are more accepted in Europe; thus manufacturers there have more motivation to put R&D money into quiet equipment technology.

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