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Trump Admin's Proposed Silica Dust Rule Decimates Black Lung Protections for Coal Miners

Amid worst black lung epidemic in 50 years, advocates warn proposal is a "death sentence" for miners

APPALACHIA – Today, with the black lung epidemic at the worst level it's reached in 50 years, the Trump-Vance administration's Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) released a proposed rule that rolls back the 2024 standard protecting coal miners from respirable silica dust — the principal cause of the resurgence of deadly black lung disease. The Trump-Vance administration's proposal is weaker than what even the coal industry itself asked for, leaving miners exposed to more toxic dust that would make the raging black lung crisis even worse.

"Dozens of miners just got back from a trip to Washington, D.C., where they urged Congress and the administration to fight for a stronger silica dust standard," **said Quenton King, Government Affairs Specialist, Appalachian Voices.** "But, instead of listening to the miners who suggested ways to strengthen that rule to save lives, the Trump-Vance administration listened to the coal bosses who want to weaken the rule to dodge accountability and line their pockets. To say this proposal is a slap in the face to the miners who have fought for decades for a strong silica rule is an understatement — instead, it's a death sentence."

The 2024 silica standard was an important, if flawed, step forward after decades of failure to protect miners. Instead of building on it, the Trump administration negotiated with the mining industry, ignored miners themselves, and produced a rule that, without significant changes, will do next to nothing to stop thousands more miners from getting sick and dying.

While advocates are still reviewing the new proposal, initial analysis finds it weakens miner protections in at least three major ways:

- **A new loophole that shortcuts the exposure limit.** The proposal adds a 21% error factor to the permissible exposure limit, allowing coal operators to expose miners to silica dust levels higher than the industry was even asking for.
- **Silica sampling left to a gutted agency.** Samples provided by operators will no longer be accepted as evidence, as only samples collected by MSHA will count. If MSHA were fully funded and staffed, this could be workable. But the Trump administration has spent btwo years cutting apart, underfunding, and understaffing MSHA. An analysis from

Reimagine Appalachia and the Appalachian Citizens' Law Center (ACLC) found that "the Trump administration's approach to coal miner safety and health has been characterized by disinvestment and regulatory rollbacks, particularly initiatives aimed at curbing the black lung epidemic." That includes significant understaffing and budget cuts for MSHA. A separate ACLC analysis of MSHA's *current* silica dust sampling found that MSHA is currently sampling only half of all active coal mines for silica dust, and that 17% of those *sampled* mines were above the exposure limit set in the now-shredded 2024 rule.

- **Miners' health put last.** Required medical exams become optional. And instead of cleaning up mines with dangerous dust levels, operators can simply rotate miners in and out of the dust, spreading the harm around instead of fixing it.

"Amid a black lung epidemic that is the worst it has been in 50 years, the Trump administration proposed a silica dust rule weaker than what miners and miner advocates won in 2024," said **Brendan Muckian-Bates, Policy and Advocacy Associate, Appalachian Citizens' Law Center.** "The administration said they wanted to bring back coal. Instead, under their watch, they are bringing back black lung."

MSHA will hold a virtual public hearing on Dec. 15 on the proposal and will accept public comments as well. Appalachian Voices, Appalachian Citizens' Law Center and its partners will work with miners, their families and mining communities to push for the stronger, enforceable protections miners demand.