

OSHA taken to task on beryllium

By Sam Roe

Tribune staff reporter

Two congressmen and two activist groups are calling for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to increase safeguards and medical testing for hundreds of agency inspectors exposed to the toxic metal beryllium.

"The very agency charged with safeguarding health and safety in the workplace is failing to protect its own workers," Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.) wrote this week to Labor Secretary Elaine Chao, whose department oversees OSHA. Miller wants OSHA to detail the safety steps it is taking.

His letter to Chao also was signed by Rep. Major Owens (D-

N.Y.), and the watchdog groups Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility and the FIGHT Project sent similar letters.

The Tribune reported last month that at least three OSHA employees developed blood abnormalities after conducting inspections in facilities handling beryllium, a lightweight metal whose dust can cause an often-fatal lung disease.

An OSHA spokesman said the agency would not comment until it completes medical screening of its inspectors. So far, 265 have been tested. The agency estimates that 1,000 inspectors, or three-fourths of its force, have conducted inspections in industries using beryllium.

Scientists have long known

that microscopic bits of beryllium can cause beryllium disease or blood abnormalities linked to the illness. Workers with seemingly incidental exposure have been affected, including secretaries in beryllium processing plants. OSHA's cases—the first at the agency—suggest an even wider group of workers might be at risk.

Miller, the senior Democrat on the House Education and the Workforce Committee, said in an interview that OSHA should test its former inspectors too.

"This isn't complicated," he said. "This is how you are supposed to treat one another."

OSHA has been criticized for years for downplaying the hazards of beryllium, which has killed hundreds of workers

since the 1940s.

The Public Employees watchdog group assailed the safety agency for repeatedly delaying the testing of inspectors. The group asked OSHA to provide the Environmental Protection Agency a list of workplaces with high levels of beryllium dust so the EPA might notify and test its exposed inspectors.

The FIGHT Project asked for an investigation into the facilities that affected OSHA inspectors.

"OSHA inspectors only spend a small time in these facilities," founder Ron Hayes wrote to Chao. "I'm worried about the workers," who spend much more time in the facilities. FIGHT stands for Families in Grief Holding Together.

OSHA offers tests for staff exposed to deadly beryllium

By Sam Roe
Tribune staff reporter

The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration, under attack recently for not protecting its own employees, will soon begin testing its inspectors for possible exposure to the deadly metal beryllium.

The agency said it will offer blood tests to 1,000 inspectors nationwide starting next month. The tests show whether people have been affected by beryllium, a lightweight metal whose dust can cause an often-fatal lung disease.

Beryllium is used in a variety of industries to help make products ranging from missile components to laptop computers to golf clubs. OSHA estimates that 1,000 inspectors, or three-fourths of its force, have conducted inspections in industries handling the metal.

Agency records show that many of those inspections have taken place in facilities that have had high levels of beryllium dust, up to 30 times the safety standard.

Dr. Lee Newman, a leading beryllium researcher, predicted OSHA likely will find that 2 percent to 6 percent of its exposed inspectors will have beryllium disease or blood abnormalities linked to the illness, the same rate found in similar testing programs.

"I am delighted that OSHA made the right decision to offer testing," Newman said. "It's important that they do this."

The private beryllium industry and some U.S. defense facilities have been testing their workers since the 1990s, often discovering cases of disease where there was thought to be none. But OSHA, the agency in charge of worker safety, has resisted testing its employees.

The agency drew up testing plans in 2001, but they stalled. Adam Finkel, OSHA's administrator for the Rocky Mountain region, kept pushing for the tests. OSHA transferred him to other duties in 2002.

Finkel filed a whistle-blower complaint, alleging he was transferred because he was advocating a safety plan that OSHA higher-ups did not want. The agency denied the claim, and the case was settled.

Jeff Ruch, executive director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, an advocacy group that backed Finkel, said the whistle-blower

had been vindicated.

"It's a shame that somebody had to jeopardize his job in order to push forward a needed safety measure," Ruch said.

Finkel, now a senior adviser at OSHA, said: "I just hope no one turns out to have blood abnormalities or disease who could have learned of this three years ago when the issue was first raised." He emphasized that he was speaking for himself and not the agency.

OSHA officials said widespread testing was not done previously because it was not a priority. Five inspectors were tested in 2000, and the results were negative. "It just hasn't been an issue for us," said Davis Layne, an OSHA deputy assistant secretary.

The agency is distributing brochures to its employees that explain the testing program, which is voluntary. But Newman said the brochures downplay the risks.

"They don't say explicitly that even people who just walk through beryllium areas can develop significant beryllium disease," he said. "I can imagine many OSHA inspectors saying, 'Heck, I wasn't exposed to much beryllium, so I won't get the test.'"

At least one person said he has decided not to be tested: Layne, the OSHA official who will oversee the program.

He said he is eligible for testing because he has spent time inside a facility that handled beryllium. "I just don't think it's anything that I'm concerned about," he said.

Newman said it is important for everyone exposed to be tested. While there is no cure for beryllium disease, early detection can aid treatment.

People with the illness often do not show symptoms for years. They then might develop shortness of breath and fatigue. Some eventually cannot breathe without the aid of an oxygen tank.

About 1,300 people have contracted beryllium disease since the 1940s; dozens of others show blood abnormalities linked to the illness.

At the University of Chicago, several workers became sick after being exposed to beryllium at a World War II research lab in the 1940s. At Argonne National Laboratory, at least seven current or former workers have been found to have blood abnormalities.