

News Release



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MSHA to publish proposed rule on belt air, improved belt material and fire protection in underground coal mining *Standards would implement recommendations of panel appointed by labor secretary*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA)’s proposed rule on belt air, improved belt materials and fire protection in underground coal mines was posted today on the *Federal Register*’s Web site and will be formally published on June 19. The proposal would implement the recommendations of the Technical Study Panel on the Utilization of Belt Air and the Composition and Fire Retardant Properties of Belt Material in Underground Coal Mining, which Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao established in accordance with Section 11 of the Mine Improvement and New Emergency Response (MINER) Act of 2006. The panel, composed of government officials, academics and consultants, conducted an independent scientific engineering review and issued its report and recommendations last December.

“The objective of this proposed rule is to improve mine safety by significantly reducing the hazard of conveyor belt fires in underground coal mines,” said Richard E. Stickler, acting assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health. “Thanks to the unanimous recommendations of the Technical Study Panel, MSHA has published a proposed rule that would include requirements for improved flame-resistant conveyor belts, fire prevention and detection in belt entries, standardized tactile signals on lifelines, and approval of the use of air from the belt entry to ventilate working sections.”

Under the proposal, underground coal mine operators would be required to purchase conveyor belts that are more flame resistant than those under the existing standard beginning one year after the effective date of the final rule. Existing belts would be permitted until replacement is necessary. Mine operators would also be required to replace point-type heat sensors with carbon monoxide sensors, install smoke sensors, improve belt maintenance, and standardize lifeline signals to identify direction of travel to the surface, storage caches for self-contained self-rescuers, obstructions to escape, and refuge alternatives.

Additionally, the proposed rule would require the primary intake escapeway to have a higher ventilating pressure than the belt entry, establish airlocks where high air pressure differentials exist between air courses on personnel doors along escapeways, establish minimum and maximum air velocities in belt entries, and require reduced dust levels in belt entries for mines that use air from the belt entry to ventilate the working section.

MSHA will accept comments until September 8, 2008, and conduct four public hearings on the proposed rule. The dates and locations of the public hearings are as follows: August 19 in Salt Lake City, Utah; August 21 in Lexington, Ky.; August 26 in Charleston, W.Va; and August 28 in Birmingham, Ala.

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