

MinEx explains hazardous substances standards

Simon Hartley - Wed, 12 May 2021



Extractives sector health and safety body MinEx has produced a short guidance document to assist quarrying and mining companies in dealing with the complex issues of new Worker Exposure Standards for hazardous substances.

MinEx chief executive Wayne Scott says the eight-page [document](#) is intended to assist quarry and mine operators to work through the sometime confusing advice on Worker Exposure Standards (WES), which involve hazardous substances such as respirable crystalline silica, nitrogen oxides, arsenic, chromium VI compounds and sulphur dioxide.

WorkSafe updated the 12th annual [WES Guidance document](#), which runs to more than 90 pages, in late 2020.

Scott says it includes advice on Biological Exposure Indices (BEI), some of which impact on the extractives sector, but generally are less relevant to the sector.

Quarrying's biggest occupational health risk

"The WorkSafe document includes the WES for the quarrying industry's biggest occupational health risk – respirable crystalline silica (RCS), at 0.05 milligram in three cubic metres of air space," Scott says.

"We're on the same page with WorkSafe in saying operators need to do all they can to minimise worker exposure to RCS and any exposures to hazardous substances in the workplace."

However, WorkSafe's target is aspirational – it is twice the 0.1mg/m³ which the Australian Institute of Occupational Hygienists recommends for extractive sites across eight hours of work.

"RCS at 0.05mg/m³ is difficult to measure with any degree of accuracy unless multiple samples over a number of shifts are taken," Scott says.

WorkSafe levels are not prescribed or enforceable standards

"WorkSafe is making clear this level and others within its document are not prescribed or enforceable standards," Scott says.

He quotes Worksafe as saying: "The values proposed are also considered to be health-based WES which means they are based on minimising health risk and don't take into consideration practicability of achieving or measuring the value."

While WorkSafe's WES and BEI are not enforceable, quarries and mines should be reducing exposure to as low as reasonably practicable and, as technology improves, working toward the WorkSafe standards, Scott says.