

Workplace safety regulation under Trump: Businesses get a freer hand (Video)

David A. Arnott

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From the earliest days of his administration, President Trump and his team have expounded on the virtues of reducing regulations on business, and in January the president signed an executive order directing federal agencies to identify regulations for trimming where possible.

One agency where that approach appears to be having a major immediate impact is the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

According to The New York Times, in the waning days of the Obama administration, OSHA finalized new rules that lowered the acceptable amount of beryllium exposure for workers, the culmination of a decades-long effort that was finally achieved with the acquiescence of the nation's largest beryllium producer. This mattered, the Times noted, not only because of the time that had been committed to reach an agreement, but also because OSHA's leadership believed the new regulations would reduce worker deaths attributable to beryllium, a metal with many applications but notably used to help sandblast large structures before painting them. In many of those sandblasting instances, OSHA had found beryllium levels in the air exceeded the new limits, the Times said.

But just a few weeks ago, OSHA proposed changes that will likely defang the new rules by exempting certain key industries, a step that falls in line with the Trump administration's wider actions regarding workplace safety, the Times said. Walter Olson of the Cato Institute told the Times: "[OSHA] under Obama changed into something that was more explicitly allied with unions and critics of business. That's likely to change." Others cited by the Times concurred with the assessment that further regulatory rollbacks are likely.

The report quoted a White House spokesperson saying, "The president and his administration care very much about worker safety but believe the Obama administration's approach was counterproductive, and we think we can do better."

Enforcement for this particular OSHA rule is not due to begin until March. Its effective date was already delayed from January to May of this year, the National Law Review said, and the proposed new changes could further alter any implementation timeline.

The seemingly more relaxed posture at OSHA under President Trump extends further than regulatory measures, reaching also to the everyday press releases the agency puts out. Last month, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution noted that OSHA had drastically reduced its number of announcements about enforcement actions. Moreover, that report said, a change with a single staffer meant OSHA hadn't posted new statistics about worker fatalities since the inauguration. As of Tuesday morning, the most recent weekly report shows data from mid-February.

That AJC story also mentioned that the Trump administration's initial budget proposal calls for cutting the Department of Labor's budget by about one-fifth, though OSHA, which is under that department's purview, would likely suffer relatively few cuts compared to other agencies, according to a Bloomberg report.