

OSHA Posts Report on Stakeholder Meeting for Noise

On Nov. 3rd, 2011, OSHA held an informal stakeholder meeting on preventing occupational hearing loss. The purpose was to provide a public forum and gather information on best practices in noise control and other aspects of the hearing conservation program. The meeting was attended by employers, trade association representatives, union health and safety representatives, attorneys, and professionals in the fields of industrial hygiene, acoustics, audiology, and other hearing health providers. There were 30 participants who discussed the issues and an additional 50 individuals who attended as observers. Several members of NHCA participated by sharing their opinions and expertise.

A detailed report of the meeting may be found at <http://www.osha.gov/dsg/noise/stakeholder-meeting.html>. The report contains no indication of how OSHA plans to use any of the resulting information.

Some of the points of general consensus (but not always unanimity) were:

- Engineering noise control should be OSHA's primary focus.
- There is widespread support for the existing hierarchy of controls.
- Buy Quiet programs, such as the one developed by NASA can be very useful.
- Audiometric testing needs to be followed up with counseling and training or else it only serves to document hearing loss.
- Comprehensive hearing conservation programs are needed for the construction industry.
- Fit-testing is an important part of an effective hearing protection program.
- There should be a mechanism by which companies could share information on noise control solutions and other successful aspects of hearing conservation programs (the Safe-in-Sound program was cited as an example).
- Program evaluation is key to preventing hearing loss.
- There is widespread support for the 85 dB PEL and 3 dB exchange rate. Several companies who used these measures were identified as "pro-active."

Richard Fairfax, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Labor, introduced the meeting explaining that OSHA has always followed the same principles in requiring an employer to implement noise controls, which may include engineering, work practice, and administrative controls. While engineering controls are always the preferred method, OSHA allows a combination of control methods and typically works with employers on abatement schedules.

OSHA Chief of Staff Deborah Berkowitz reminded everyone that OSHA provides free on-site visits and can help small businesses with noise issues. There is a toll-free number for this service: 800-321-6742.