

Opening Remarks

Mr. Larry W. Sparks  
Acting Deputy Director  
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

Good Morning. I am Larry W. Sparks, Acting Deputy Director of NIOSH, and I would like to welcome you to Morgantown, and to NIOSH's Appalachian Laboratory for Occupational Safety and Health. We are quite pleased that so many of you could be here today.

As you arrived here at NIOSH Morgantown, you may have seen evidence that this is a site in transition. Construction is underway of a three-tier parking structure. Shortly, site preparation will begin for the construction of a new 7-story laboratory facility, and the additional parking will be needed to accommodate the increased staff, including many new NIOSH scientists, administrators, and support staff that will be working here. The new laboratory facility, which will be constructed adjacent to the current building, represents a significant commitment to the future of the Morgantown laboratories, and to the Federal respirator testing and certification program that is conducted at this facility. NIOSH is committed to providing state-of-the-art facilities and research opportunities to enhance worker protection.

We are here today to talk about another "construction" process,

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as we build toward the day when we can accurately, and routinely, assess the workplace performance of respirators prior to certifying them.

NIOSH is understandably concerned about the level of worker protection provided to wearers of NIOSH-certified respirators. Several years ago, field research studies began to show that the level of protection provided in the workplace may not be as high as levels predicted from laboratory-based research. NIOSH acknowledges that none of the current certification tests are proven indicators of overall respirator performance in the workplace. As a result of the growing uncertainty as to whether NIOSH-certified respirators are providing adequate protection to the millions of workers who rely on them, NIOSH established the goal that future research and regulatory efforts would focus on developing accurate measures of actual workplace performance.

When NIOSH initially proposed in 1987 that workplace evaluation of respirators be performed as part of the certification process, many respirator experts who commented on the proposal felt that suitable protocols for workplace testing were not available, and therefore that workplace testing was not currently feasible. A consensus developed in the respirator community that regulatory requirements for workplace performance testing would be premature. As a result, NIOSH modified its proposal. Workplace testing is not required in 42 CFR Part 84, which will soon be promulgated to take the place of 30 CFR Part 11.

However, NIOSH still feels strongly that assessments of workplace performance of respirators need to be done, in order for us to feel confident that certified respirators provide workers with adequate levels of protection. Therefore, NIOSH is beginning the process of gathering the necessary information to include workplace performance testing or validated simulated-workplace testing in the Certification Program. This technical conference is the initial step in that lengthy process, a step that we hope will effectively lay a foundation for future activities. We are here to focus specifically on the question of how best to ensure adequate levels of workplace performance from certified respirators. NIOSH scientists have been conducting research, aimed at developing and evaluating methods for measuring workplace performance. This research is moving us toward our goal. We are here today to present our research to you, and to hear about your concepts, research, and recommendations regarding workplace performance testing, simulated-workplace performance testing, protocols, sampling techniques, and other technical issues surrounding this important topic.

We are happy that many of the leaders in the respiratory protection community, both from this country and Great Britain, are present here today. Business, labor, academia, and government are represented in this audience. We are encouraged by your presence and participation, and are confident that together we can make progress in dealing with this vitally important matter.

Results of the meeting will be used to:

- 1) Identify research needed to close knowledge gaps
- 2) Design and perform future research
- 3) When feasible, revise future certification regulations to include workplace or validated simulated-workplace testing.