

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-2803

January 29, 2004

The Honorable Spencer Abraham
Secretary of Energy
U.S. Department of Energy
1000 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20585

Dear Secretary Abraham:

I am deeply concerned about the health of workers on the Yucca Mountain project in Nevada. I have recently learned that two current workers have contracted silicosis and that their illness may have been caused by inhaling silica while working at the Yucca Mountain site.

Silicosis is a disabling, nonreversible, and sometimes fatal lung disease which causes scar tissue to form in the lungs, reducing the lungs' ability to extract oxygen from the air. I am pleased that the Department of Energy initiated the Silicosis Screening Program to provide free health screenings and to locate and notify workers who may have had long-term, repeated exposure to airborne silica.

I am disturbed, however, that the DOE appears to have lacked adequate safety precautions to protect workers at the site. Silica is known to exist naturally at the Yucca Mountain site, and the dangers of consistent exposure to silica are well-documented. In addition, the Department of Labor has found that silicosis is "100 percent preventable." Yet the DOE stated in its press release on this issue that workers were exposed to dangerous amounts of airborne silica "at various times" between 1992 and 2000. The release also stated: "During early work at the site, respiratory protection was available but requirements for its use were not consistently applied." These statements suggest that the DOE recognized the risk posed to workers at Yucca Mountain from silica and failed to take sufficient measures to protect them.

In order to better understand these circumstances, please provide me with answers to the following questions:

1. Was the DOE aware of high levels of silica at the Yucca Mountain site prior to tunnel construction? If so, what steps were taken to protect workers from exposure to airborne silica? If not, when did the DOE become aware of this problem and what steps were then taken to protect workers?
2. Did the DOE receive information from any workers about potential exposure? If so, what did the DOE do with that information?
3. In the January 15, 2004 DOE press release, you say: "During early work at the site, respiratory protection was available but requirements for its use were

not consistently applied.” What were these requirements? What enforcement mechanisms existed to ensure they were applied?

4. What programs are currently in place to ensure that no additional workers are exposed to harmful levels of silica?
5. How many workers at the Yucca Mountain site, working for DOE or its contractors, were exposed to dangerous levels of silica?
6. Does the DOE have a program in place to identify individuals who routinely visited the site who are not project employees?
7. What action does the DOE plan to take for workers who have contracted silicosis from exposure to silica at Yucca Mountain?

We have a responsibility to protect first and foremost the health and safety of workers at the Yucca Mountain project. If you have any questions about my request, please contact me or have your staff contact Sara Mills of my staff at (202) 224-3542.

I look forward to hearing from you and working with you to ensure that these issues are immediately addressed.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Harry Reid". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "H" and "R".

HARRY REID
United States Senator

Cc: Mr. Gregory Friedman, Inspector General, U.S. Department of Energy