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Lead story

Better protection for workers exposed to asbestos



On 27 June, the European Council and Parliament reached a provisional agreement on a new directive to strengthen the protection of workers from the risks related to exposure to asbestos (see [press release](#)). This compromise text is currently undergoing revision, with a view to formal adoption by both institutions. The directive will then be published and Member States will have two years to transpose it into their domestic law (see [press release](#)). The European Commission put forward the proposal for a directive on 28 September 2022, accompanied by a communication entitled “[Working towards an asbestos-free future](#)” (see [IR Notes 193](#) and [Asbestos](#)). The new rules agreed will initially reduce the maximum limit for exposure to 0.01 fibres of asbestos per cm^3 , which is ten times lower than the current limit of 0.1 f/m^3 . Parliament, which had been calling for a reduction to 0.001 fibres of asbestos per cm^3 (see [IR Notes 172](#)) had to give way on this target figure. MEPs nevertheless managed to extract a number of concessions. For example, the text sets a maximum transition period of six years, during which time Member States will have to implement a new method for measuring asbestos levels, namely electron microscopy (EM), which is more sensitive than the technique currently used. Once they have introduced this technique, States will have two options: they can either undertake to measure thin asbestos fibres, using electron microscopy, in which case the maximum exposure limit will remain at 0.01 f/cm^3 ; or they can choose not to measure thin asbestos fibres, in which case the maximum exposure limit will be reduced to 0.002 f/cm^3 . The trade-union world reacted positively to this compromise, which will protect between 4 and 7 million workers in the EU against asbestos. As the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) points out, this substance causes 90,000 deaths per year (see [press release](#)). What made the adoption of this text all the more urgent is that the number of workers exposed to asbestos is set to rise sharply in the coming years, due to the expansion in thermal renovation projects, as provided for by the European Green Deal. The ETUC expressed regret that these new standards are arriving too late, in light of the transition period, to protect the workers involved in building renovation projects. The compromise also partially satisfies the demands of the employers’ organisations concerned, which were advocating a seven-year transition period (see [FIEC and EBC press release](#)). There is nothing to prevent Member States enhancing the protection they provide and moving forward faster. For example, Denmark has already fixed its exposure limit at 0.003 f/cm^3 and brought forward a number of other obligations introduced by the directive: since 1 July, the authority responsible for the working environment will be entitled to impose fines amounting to 10,000 crowns (1342 euros) on companies that fail to declare their asbestos work (see [press release](#)), and with effect from 1 January 2025, an authorisation system will come into effect for companies handling asbestos (see [press release](#) issued by the FH confederation).