

# U.S. Issuing Regulations On Repetitive-Task Injuries

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Associated Press

WASHINGTON — More than 100 million Americans with jobs ranging from the assembly line to the computer terminal would get new protections for work-related injuries caused by repetitive motion, under government standards to be issued Monday.

The rules, more than a decade in the making, are stridently opposed by the business community and resulted in the derailing of final budget negotiations between the White House and GOP lawmakers. Industry groups promise to challenge the standard in court.

Organized labor had pushed for the regulations, which could force companies to alter work stations, redesign facilities or change tools and equipment once employees are found to suffer work-related injuries.

"Employers already have begun putting ergonomic programs in place," said Charles [redacted] who heads the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, in an interview Saturday. "By adding the impetus of a standard, we think we can reach out and protect more workers than are currently covered."

The standard goes into effect Jan. 16, 2001, with businesses coming into

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compliance by October. Some of the 6 million workplaces covered by the rule may have to do little more than provide workers with information about ergonomics-related injuries and their symptoms.

But if a worker reports symptoms of a musculoskeletal disorder — such as carpal tunnel syndrome, back pain and tendinitis — the employer must determine whether that problem is connected to the job. The worker is entitled to medical care and time off with pay. The employer must then examine more broadly if that job exposes workers to risks, and take steps to reduce the hazards.

Ergonomics is the science of tailoring a job to the worker to prevent injuries caused by wear and tear on the body.

The agency hopes the standards will prevent 460,000 workers from getting hurt on the job each year. Ac-

cording to OSHA, 1.8 million workers have musculoskeletal injuries related to ergonomic factors, and 600,000 people miss some work because of them annually.

OSHA says the rules would cost businesses some \$4.5 billion to implement, but would reap \$9 billion a year in savings from medical expenses and workers' compensation.

But business leaders sharply dispute the cost figures, citing a think tank study that estimated costs of more than \$90 billion a year.

"We do not believe that there is an adequate scientific basis that [the rule] meets the statutory requirement, and we believe it is unconstitutionally vague," said Stephen Bokat, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce senior vice president and general counsel. The group will seek to overturn the standard in court, Bokat said Saturday.

Labor officials dispute that the standard places undue burden on employers because companies do not have to take preventive action against hazardous conditions until an injury is reported.

"In some respects, the rule is quite conservative," said Peg Seminario, health and safety director for the

"It requires a significant level of exposure. The idea that any ache or pain is what is triggering exposure here is not the case."