

Media Release

The Hon Danny Pearson MP
Minister for Government Services
Assistant Treasurer
Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC
Minister for Consumer Affairs



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VICTORIA BACKS NATIONAL BAN ON DEADLY ENGINEERED STONE

The Andrews Labor Government will support national moves to ban engineered stone to protect workers from the devastating lung disease silicosis, a reform that builds on Victoria's nation-leading action over the past four years.

Victorian Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC Danny Pearson today joined with his Commonwealth and state counterparts in directing Safe Work Australia to undertake urgent investigations into the impacts of a proposed ban on engineered stone.

The Ministers have instructed the national body to report back within six months and Mr Pearson said Victoria's WorkSafe authority would be a willing contributor to Safe Work Australia's consultation.

The ministerial council agreed it was a national priority to adopt "stronger regulation of high-risk crystalline silica processes for all materials (including engineered stone) across all industries."

Victoria has introduced the toughest regulations in the country to protect workers and strengthened the available support for workers who are suffering from silicosis.

Since 15 November 2022, all businesses working with engineered stone in Victoria must be licensed.

Victoria's Silica Action Plan introduced in 2019 includes a permanent ban on dry-cutting of engineered stone and free health screenings for Victoria's past and present stonemasons, as well as a dedicated WorkSafe silica team to monitor and enforce compliance with the new obligations for stonemasons.

In Victoria, all crystalline silica work – including tunnelling – is regulated. The laws clearly define high-risk crystalline silica work and mandate controls, risk assessment and training for workers.

The risks of silica are well understood and are actively managed across Victoria's major projects.

Major Transport Infrastructure Authority projects use engineering controls to keep workers safe, including ventilation, wetting down and vacuum extraction systems as well as stringent requirements for use of respiratory PPE where necessary.

Changes made to Victoria's workers compensation scheme mean eligible workers suffering from silicosis no longer need to prove that their injury has stabilised to access lump sum payments.

The changes also mean workers who have already received compensation for certain occupational diseases can apply for additional benefits if they develop a further related disease or injury.

A partnership between WorkSafe and Alfred Health has created Australia's only dedicated public occupational respiratory clinic, which has given hundreds of workers the chance to diagnose any sign of the disease early.

Victoria also supports the Commonwealth's intention to explore a ban on the importation of engineered stone, and to work with unions and businesses "to eliminate silicosis and silica-related diseases and to increase the quality of life of those already impacted".

Victoria's pioneering action to regulate crystalline silica work will also be extended nationally after key decisions taken at the meeting of Work Health and Safety Ministers.

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Commonwealth Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations Tony Burke indicated the Commonwealth's intention to consult on the introduction of an industrial manslaughter offence under Commonwealth workplace health and safety laws.

In Victoria, workplace manslaughter is already a criminal offence with penalties of fines ranging to \$18.5 million and jail terms of up to 25 years, sending a clear message to employers that putting lives at risk in the workplace is not tolerated.

Quotes attributable to Minister for WorkSafe and the TAC Danny Pearson

"Silicosis is a national tragedy and disgrace and that's why we've led the way to protect workers in Victoria."

"We've introduced tough regulations and we support a national ban on engineered stone for the simple reason that no one should be exposed to fatal risks when they clock on each morning."

"We'll keep protecting Victorian stone workers – they deserve nothing less."