

# Workers' health focus of OSHA investigation

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US Labor Secretary William Brock has asked the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to investigate allegations of excessive health problems among workers in the nation's semiconductor industry, the Labor Department confirmed yesterday.

Brock took the action in apparent response to a personal appeal from Morton Bahr, president of the Communication Workers of America for a government probe of chip-making hazards.

Bahr, who met with the labor secretary last week during the AFL-CIO's executive council session in Florida, reportedly told Brock that many chip workers are facing "life threatening situations" because of chemicals used in semiconductor manufacturing and asked for an immediate action.

CWA officials said yesterday Bahr followed up that request with a letter to Brock, citing several studies linking chip work to excessive health hazards - including a recently completed Massachusetts study that found twice the expected rate of miscarriages among some pregnant chip workers.

Paul Williams, a Labor Department official, said Brock has told OSHA to look into the allegations and report its findings back to him. "He's moving ahead on this," Williams said of Brock.

Williams maintained it was "too early" for the Labor Department to say exactly what form the OSHA investigation

would take. But, he added: "They'll be more coming from us on this in the future."

"We do have instructions from the (labor) secretary to look into this situation and get back to him," OSHA spokesman Terry Mikelson confirmed last night.

The Labor Department's action comes amid growing calls from unions and occupational health groups that semiconductor manufacturers clean up work practices.

Last week, the 700,000-member CWA announced that it was joining a coalition of 40 labor unions and community groups in a nationwide drive aimed at forcing chip makers to remove potentially hazardous chemicals from the chip-making process - or remove workers exposed to them.

The coalition was formed following a study of semiconductor workers at Digital Equipment Corporation's plant in Hudson. The study found twice the expected rate of miscarriages among some women production workers, and higher worker-reported rates of general illness such as headaches and nausea.

The Digital-sponsored study did not link any of the reported illnesses with chemicals used in chip making. But based on the study, several leading chip makers - including Digital and American Telephone and Telegraph - are removing pregnant women from production lines.