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MONEYLINE

A QUICK READ ON THE TOP MONEY NEWS OF THE DAY

Government puts chipmakers under new safety scrutiny

By Elliot Blair Smith
and Julie Schmit
USA TODAY

Assistant U.S. Labor Secretary Charles Jeffress said Tuesday that the government is "alarmed" by the health risks semiconductor industry workers face from dangerous chip-making chemicals and that the department has launched an enforcement program to help it target problem employers.

Jeffress, responding to a two-day report by USA TODAY that documented serious breakdowns in health and safety procedures in the semiconductor industry, including workplace explosions and poisonings, said that while the industry has a relatively low injury and illness rate "that rate can hide problems at individual companies."

Under the new program, Jeffress said, the Occupational Safety and Health Administra-

tion (OSHA), which he heads, will move beyond identifying problem industries and for the first time identify problem employers for investigation.

Jeffress said that some semiconductor manufacturers can expect to be targeted. "It is clear that some companies are doing very poorly," he said.

Industry experts questioned OSHA's ability to regulate the industry until it updates limits for worker exposures to chip-making chemicals. Most of the standards are nearly 30 years old and are said to remain dangerously high.

Alan Weinrich, an environmental analyst at the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists in Cincinnati, says, "Everybody agrees — including OSHA — that their regulations are inadequate ... to control worker exposures to chemicals."

OSHA and the Environmen-

tal Protection Agency also said they plan to review their handling of a California semiconductor manufacturer, Zilog, whose fabrication plant in Nampa, Idaho, was the source of about 900 worker complaints in 1993 and 1994.

OSHA inspected the Zilog plant five times in that two-year period, identifying minor problems that resulted in fines of a few hundred dollars to a few thousand dollars. USA TODAY reported that Zilog itself documented violations that neither its workers nor the government knew about.

"Clearly, (Zilog) needs more attention than what we've given it so far," Jeffress said.

The EPA said it also will review whether the Zilog plant needs greater supervision after USA TODAY reported that Zilog inaccurately reported its hazardous waste accumulations to regulators on several occa-

sions from 1992 to 1994, and was tardy in disposing of the wastes as recently as July.

Although the EPA designates the Idaho Health and Welfare Department's Division of Environmental Quality as chief hazardous waste regulator in Idaho, the state hasn't inspected the Zilog plant in more than seven years, during which time Zilog won state approvals for a \$200 million expansion.

The EPA's Mark Masarik, hazardous waste team leader in Idaho, says, "We want to go back to the state at this point and say: 'Is this a higher risk facility that we need to be checking more frequently?'"

Zilog issued a statement saying: "Zilog believes the story in USA TODAY did not completely reflect events that occurred five years ago. We treated our workers fairly at all times and with the highest regard for their safety."



By Sam Ward,
USA TODAY

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