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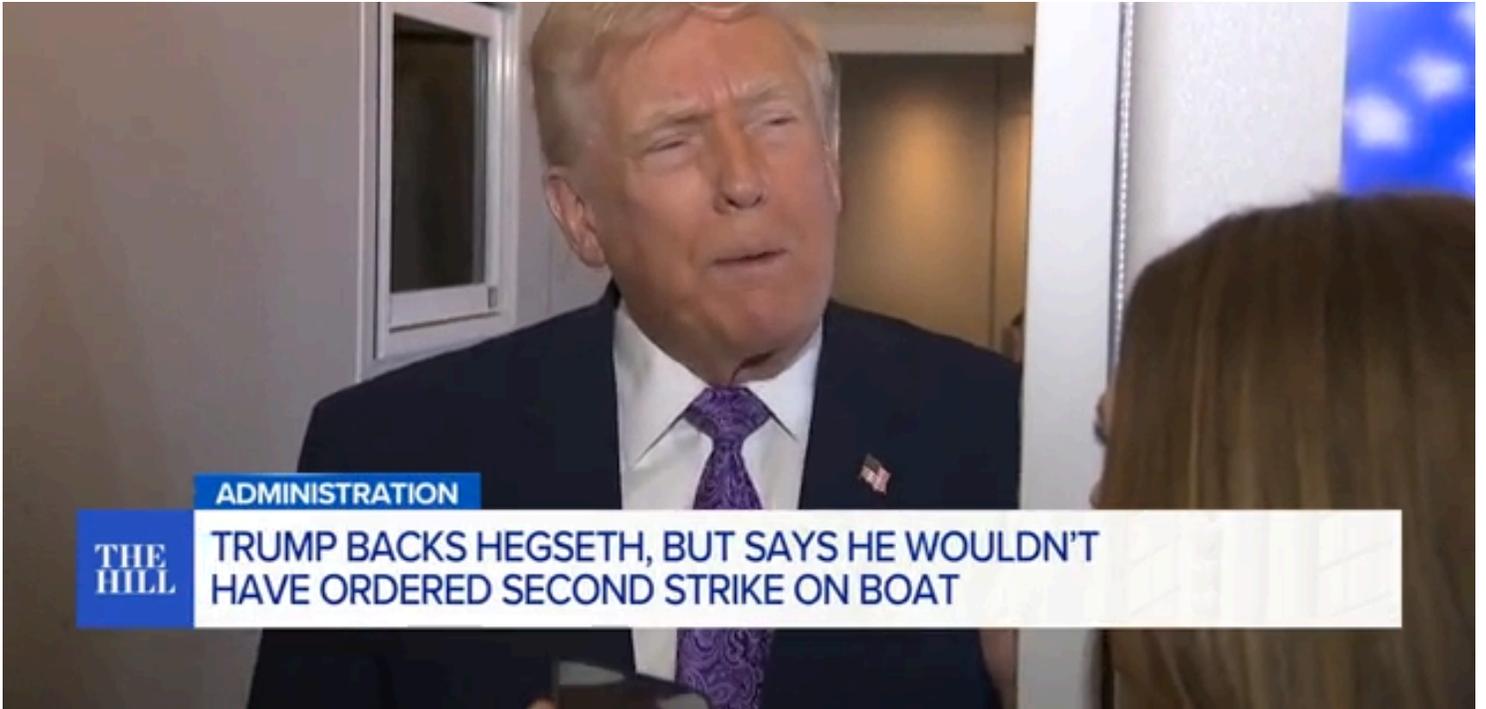
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Trump admin will reconsider part of rule to protect miners from lung diseases

BY RACHEL FRAZIN - 12/01/25 3:12 PM ET



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The Trump administration says it will reconsider aspects of a rule that aims to protect miners from exposure to cancer-causing silica dust on the job.

In a court filing last week, the Trump administration said that the Labor Department plans to “reconsider” portions of the rule that are the subjects of an ongoing legal fight.

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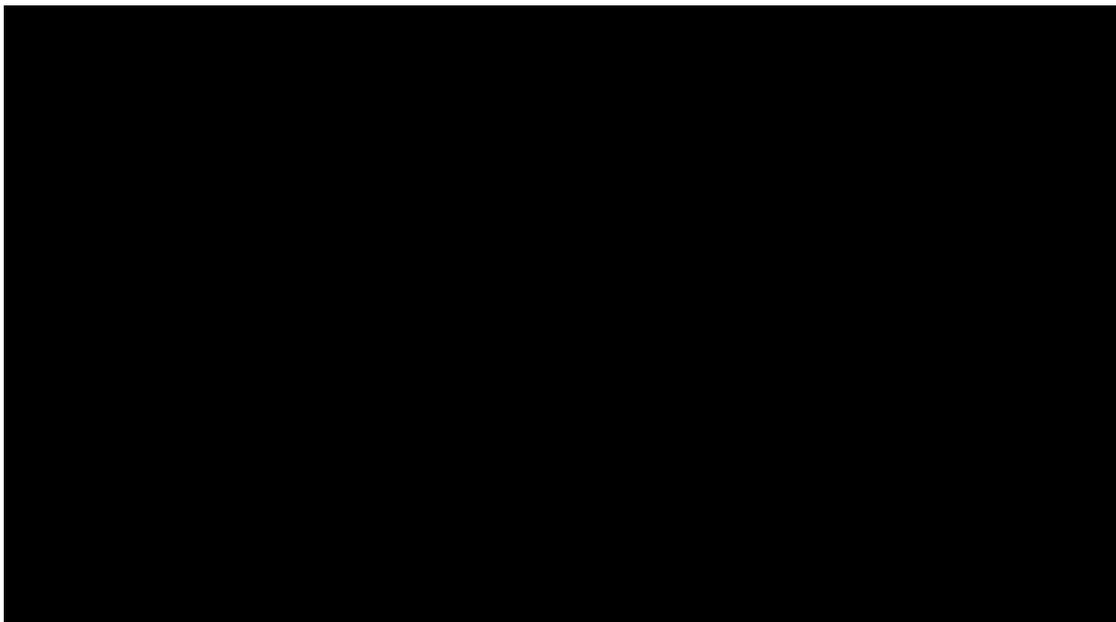
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It did not specify what exactly it plans to reconsider about the rule, and a spokesperson did not immediately respond to questions from The Hill.

The rule in question was issued by the Biden administration in 2024. It lowered the legal limit for miners' exposure to silica while on the job.

Exposure to this dust can cause lung cancer, kidney cancer and other lung diseases such as emphysema and silicosis.

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The Biden administration said that its rule would save more than 1,000 lives.

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However, it has faced industry opposition.

Ashley Burke, spokesperson for the National Mining Association, has said the rule “needs to allow for” the use of administrative controls and personal protective equipment to help companies meet the standards.

According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), engineering controls are considered more effective than administrative controls or protective equipment at



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However, they also said they are “left in substantial uncertainty” because the administration “does not say what its rulemaking will cover, nor how long its rulemaking might take.”

Supporters of the Biden-era rule says it is important for protecting people and preventing disease.

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“Everyone deserves to be safe at work,” said Chelsea Barnes, director of government affairs and strategy at environmental organization Appalachian Voices.

“If this administration wants to increase mining across the country, they need to put the miners and the workers first and protect them from silicosis and black lung disease,” Barnes said.

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Trump wants mining. Federal mine safety workers are on the chopping block.

By [HANNAH NORTHEY \(HTTPS://WWW.EENEWS.NET/MEET-THE-TEAM/HANNAH-NORTHEY/\)](https://www.eenews.net/meet-the-team/hannah-northey/) | 09/05/2025 01:41 PM EDT

Scientists who work to prevent mine disasters and the spread of disease among miners face looming cuts under the Trump administration.



Scott Laney holds a sign during a rally in support of researchers and other employees of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health office in Morgantown, West Virginia. Some employees in that office were later told their jobs would not be eliminated. Gene J. Puskar/AP

Federal scientists and engineers working to prevent deadly disasters and the spread of disease in miners could soon lose their jobs, even as President Donald Trump moves to supercharge U.S. production of coal and critical minerals.

More than 570 workers at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, or NIOSH, are waiting to see if their jobs will remain cut after they were dismissed earlier this year, including about 170 staffers conducting screenings and research to keep mine workers safe.

NIOSH's mine safety research divisions in Spokane, Washington, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, are housed within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and tasked with preventing injury, illness and death in the workplace.

The exodus threatens to undermine the government's ability to prevent explosions, mine collapses and black lung diseases, said one agency staffer who was granted anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

"The next mine disaster that happens, the [public] is going to look to Congress and say, 'Why wasn't this prevented?' and we're the only group that does that sort of work," said the staffer.

The fate of those workers could hinge on a legal fight playing out in a district court in Rhode Island, where more than a dozen states are suing Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. over his plan to dramatically downsize his agency.

A federal judge in the Rhode Island case granted — and later narrowed (<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2025/08/court-agrees-to-let-hhs-move-forward-with-some-cdc-terminations-00506782>) — a preliminary injunction earlier this year that halted the terminations, while attorneys with the Department of Justice have urged the court to [dismiss the lawsuit](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/eenews/f/eenews/?id=00000199-1a65-d6fc-a9f9-fe77561f0000) (<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/eenews/f/eenews/?id=00000199-1a65-d6fc-a9f9-fe77561f0000>).

Kennedy has [moved to lay off thousands of employees](https://www.politico.com/news/2025/04/01/kennedy-lays-off-thousands-across-the-health-bureaucracy-00262913) (<https://www.politico.com/news/2025/04/01/kennedy-lays-off-thousands-across-the-health-bureaucracy-00262913>) across the Department of Health and Human Services through a reduction in force that's hit workers across the agency's footprint, from the Food and Drug Administration to the CDC and the National Institutes of Health. In April, about 900 of NIOSH's 1,300 workers were told they'd be cut.

The plan to gut NIOSH has faced pushback on Capitol Hill, among industry groups and in court, with top Republicans from coal-heavy states like West Virginia coming to the agency's defense.

That pressure has partially paid off. Following a lawsuit brought by a coal miner, Kennedy [during a House budget hearing in May](https://www.npr.org/2025/05/14/nx-s1-5398092/niosh-reinstates-occupational-health-workers) (<https://www.npr.org/2025/05/14/nx-s1-5398092/niosh-reinstates-occupational-health-workers>) confirmed that 328 workers at NIOSH — including those screening coal miners for black lung diseases in West Virginia — had been reinstated.

But the 170 remaining NIOSH staffers who also work on miner safety in Pennsylvania and Washington state remain vulnerable, said Brendan Demich, vice president of American Federation of Government Employees Local 1916 representing NIOSH worker at both locations.

Some people who are deemed critical have been back on the job at NIOSH even after they were told they would be terminated, said the agency staffer. Yet even those workers are limited in what they can do amid travel and spending restrictions, they said, while others have left to take better-paying jobs in the private sector.

When asked about the lawsuit and staff cuts, Emily Hilliard, a spokesperson for HHS, maintained that critical services are being preserved. The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

"Under Secretary Kennedy's leadership, the nation's critical public health functions remain intact and effective," Hilliard said. "The Trump Administration is committed to protecting essential services like those that support coal miners and firefighters through NIOSH."

But Demich said miner health and safety are indeed being gutted and that unless Kennedy reverses course, the secretary will oversee the demise of a 115-year legacy of protecting miners from explosions, fires, cave-ins and chronic diseases, like black lung.

"Mining families, like my own, will see their loved ones suffer from preventable mining incidents and illnesses," he said. "We hope this administration recognizes that the Mining Program is an efficient and effective use of taxpayer funds and reinstates this unique program."

Contradictions



A coal miner in 2016 measures the air flow in an underground coal mine less than 40 inches high in Welch, West Virginia. | David Goldman/AP

The pending termination of federal workers dedicated to miner safety comes as Trump frequently touts the importance of expanding mining.

The president and his top officials have moved to expand mining operations across the nation by clawing back regulations, fast-tracking reviews and supercharging funding to bolster domestic mining of coal, copper, uranium and critical minerals.

The White House has also proposed to maintain funding for mining safety programs even as staff have been told they will be cut.

The Trump administration is seeking to slash NIOSH's budget down to \$73 million for fiscal 2026, down from current spending levels of \$362.8 million. But the administration would maintain funding for mining safety research activities at \$67 million, which is consistent with prior years, said Demich with the union.

Senate and House appropriations bills moving through Congress likewise call for level funding in that area, he added.

When asked about staff and funding cuts at NIOSH on Capitol Hill, Kennedy has signaled support. "If Congress funds it, I'll keep the program open," Kennedy told Democratic Rep. Greg Landsman of Ohio at a [House Energy and Commerce subcommittee hearing](https://energycommerce.house.gov/events/health-subcommittee-hearing-the-fiscal-year-2026-department-of-health-and-human-services-budget) (<https://energycommerce.house.gov/events/health-subcommittee-hearing-the-fiscal-year-2026-department-of-health-and-human-services-budget>) in June.

The mixed messages are sewing confusion at NIOSH, said the staffer. "It's like you're going to fully fund us, but you're also firing everyone," they said.

The federal government began researching mine safety in 1910 with the creation of the Bureau of Mines following a series of deadly explosions and accidents in U.S. coal mines.

Just three years prior, 350 miners died at a West Virginia mine from an explosion that triggered a mine collapse.

The bureau [was shuttered in 1996](https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2024/07/23/q-a-she-was-forced-to-close-the-bureau-of-mines-could-it-return-00170317) (<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2024/07/23/q-a-she-was-forced-to-close-the-bureau-of-mines-could-it-return-00170317>) and much of its work halted, but federally mandated research on mine safety was shifted to places like Pittsburgh.

Today, NIOSH staffers there are working to eliminate mining fatalities, injuries and illnesses tied to silica dust, a known carcinogen.

The staffer said those workers include “incredibly highly specialized engineers and scientists” who conduct life-saving research, including research groups in Spokane and Pittsburgh that are developing personal monitors for workers to gather real-time data on what types and levels of dust they’re being exposed to.

“They do research that can’t be done elsewhere or won’t be done elsewhere, because it’s either not feasible or not financially viable for a company to do this type of work,” said the staffer.

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