



Flour dust standards - what should they be?

New Zealand's workplaces must comply with a range of guidance designed to reduce the risk of harm to workers.

For our nation's bakers working with flour, there is specific workplace guidance about the permitted size of flour dust particles. This guidance is designed to reduce the health risks associated with repeated exposure to tiny flour particles.

The current WorkSafe Exposure Standard (WES) guideline for flour is measured as a time weighted average value, which is $1\text{mg}/\text{m}^3$.

We were contacted by commercial bakers concerned about a proposal by WorkSafe to issue a new WES guideline with a lower permitted size of flour dust - reduced to a level of $0.2\text{mg}/\text{m}^3$.

We understand this level of flour dust is so low that it's almost impossible to measure – at that size, flour dust can't be separated from other types of dust particles in the air.

Exposure to flour dust increases the risk of respiratory disease, particularly occupational asthma. The permitted level needs to be set in a way that minimises those risks, whilst also being measurable, achievable and not placing unnecessary burden on businesses. We were concerned that the proposed WES changes were not fit-for-purpose.

What did we do?

We met with commercial bakers and with WorkSafe to understand the issue. Then we undertook local and international research about other jurisdictions including the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom (UK). We then critically analysed our findings against the current and proposed legal settings and good regulation principles.

We found that the proposed new WES is out of line with Australia and the UK and could place an inappropriate level of burden on businesses to comply with.

We heard from one commercial stakeholder that, even if they invested millions in retrofitted air conditioning units, purchasing new industrial vacuum cleaners, and additional controls in bakeries including deep cleaning, it would still be almost impossible to comply with the lower level.

We worked constructively with WorkSafe which has paused work on the WES and will further assess if it is fit-for-purpose – minimising risks to bakers’ health whilst not placing unnecessary cost and burden on businesses.

What is the benefit for New Zealanders?

Continued supply of delicious bakery items without the added imposition of regulation that may not be fit-for-purpose and would potentially add costs that would be passed on to consumers.