

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Ilhan Omar (MN-05)

Subcommittee on Workforce Protections

Examining the Policies and Priorities of the Mine Safety and Health Administration

Thursday, January 22, 2026 | 10:15 a.m.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good morning, everyone. Thank you so much, Assistant Secretary Palmer, for being here today.

Since its inception in 1977, the Mine Safety and Health Administration, or MSHA, has strived to protect America's miners from occupational hazards and negative health impacts and prevent disasters through inspection and oversight. MSHA sets vital health and safety standards, such as rules on dust levels, posting warning signs, and controls for explosive hazards. To set those standards, MSHA heavily relies on the research capacity of other agencies, such as the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), which identifies hazards and conducts health research.

MSHA's work is critical in keeping miners healthy and alive. Unfortunately, after declining for decades, black lung disease is now on the rise. X-ray surveillance data indicated that the prevalence of black lung disease had *doubled* from 2007 to 2017. Nearly one in five long-tenured miners in Appalachia have been diagnosed with black lung disease. The most severe form, called Progressive Massive Fibrosis, is now at epidemic levels.

PMF, or complicated black lung, is caused by the inhalation of coal and silica dust. In fact, silica dust is *20 times* more toxic than coal dust alone and has been identified as one of the main causes of the spike in black lung. Black lung can be a devastating disease. Miners gradually lose the ability to breathe, causing them to wheeze and gasp for air. For some with PMF, survival requires a lung transplant, but even then, life expectancy does not usually exceed five years. Even more troubling, PMF is now afflicting miners at far earlier ages, with cases being documented in miners in their 30s and 40s. Unfortunately, there is no cure for black lung disease.

The relationship between silica and black lung disease among coal miners is particularly well known, but silica dust is also a significant threat to workers in metal/nonmetal mines, which make up more than 90 percent of active mines in the country. These miners also face the risk of chronic lung disease and cancer.

Recognizing this longstanding danger, the Biden Administration made one of the most significant updates to mine safety standards in decades to protect miners from exposure to silica dust. In 2024, the Biden-era Department of Labor issued a rule to protect workers from serious health threats by lowering the allowable levels of silica exposure in mines and extending operator-funded respiratory screenings to miners.

But now the Trump Administration is reversing course on this progress by refusing to defend this new rule in court. We often hear our colleagues on the other side of the aisle accuse regulatory agencies in Democratic administrations of what they call "sue and settle," but right now this administration appears to be working hand in hand with the mining companies to weaken this important silica rule.

Also, of critical concern is MSHA's ability to hold bad operators accountable for injuring or killing miners. MSHA now has only 654 inspectors. I look forward to hearing more from the Assistant Secretary about his plans to restore the agency to full capacity.

Staffing, ultimately, is the agency's capacity to get its job done to protect miners. I worry that the current status is not serving miners well. In 2025 alone, there was a 21 percent increase in mine fatalities, driven by a 44 percent increase in deaths in metal/nonmetal mines...By firing staff at MSHA and NIOSH, refusing to enforce safety regulations, and closing dozens of regional MSHA offices, the Trump Administration is failing to protect the health and safety of hardworking miners and sabotaging decades of efforts to prevent black lung.

As health care costs skyrocket, miners should not have to worry about workplace exposures forcing them into the hospital. Assistant Secretary Palmer, I look forward to our conversation today, and I hope that we can figure out a way to keep miners safe and prevent future tragedies.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I yield back.