

EPSU Statement

Fighting exposure to carcinogens at the workplace at EU, national and local level for firefighters

1. Adopting good behaviour as a firefighter to prevent occupational cancers

In the frame of the EPSU Firefighters Network, adopting good behaviour as a firefighter to prevent occupational cancers has been one of the central themes of the network in the last two years.

Firefighters and civil protection workers often place concerns about their own health and safety after those of the people they are trying to help.

It had to take some terrible events, such as the World Trade Center incident on September 11, 2001, to make us take a closer look at issues regarding firefighters health and safety. Many rescue workers walked away from that disaster with long lasting illnesses many of which are still beginning to surface. Undoubtedly more World Trade Center rescue workers will continue to become ill in the future as a result of their work during that time period.

In Europe sadly too many firefighters are developing cancer from many types of exposures on the job. Not only do firefighters risk their lives while on duty to help others, the risks they take are causing many to lose their careers, and unfortunately their lives.

A Danish brochure on how to adopt preventive behaviours for firefighters on the job in [English](#) translated into [German](#) illustrates which steps to take in that regard. A Swedish brochure “Healthy Firefighters” is also available in several languages.

2. Strengthening the European framework to prevent and eliminate work-related cancer: amending the Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive (2004/37/EC)

The need to improve existing legislation, specifically to define binding occupational exposure limit values (BOELs) for a number of substances is crucial. Several Member States support and expressed this point of view at the conference organized in Amsterdam in May 2016. A number of sectoral organisations, including EPSU think that EU legislation on OELs need to be shored up, especially considering that national legislation in this area varies considerably between the 28 Member States.

In the field of prevention of occupational cancers, it is important to strengthen the European legislative framework to counterbalance the current weakness of the economic incentives of employers and reduce social inequality in terms of cancers and other diseases caused by chemical substances.¹

The cost of occupational cancer is almost totally externalized to social security and public health structures.

¹ L. Vogel, European legislation and prevention of occupational cancers, European Trade Union Institute, 2016.

Occupational exposure limits are therefore an important tool for protecting firefighters against adverse effects of exposure to hazardous substances. However, effective prevention is based on the elimination of hazardous substances together with the development of alternatives in work organization. Occupational exposure limits are a tool for assessing the risks and deciding on the measures to be implemented to minimize exposure when primary prevention measures cannot be taken.

It is crucial that public employers organize health checks for firefighters beyond the periods in which they are exposed to carcinogens. In fact, the latency period between exposure and the development of a cancerous disease may last many decades. Timely detection can save countless lives.

The European Trade Union Confederation has therefore launched a campaign to address workplace use of carcinogens and work-related cancer. Amongst other measures the ETUI has published a proposal for more binding OELs at EU level.

The ETUC's list of 50 includes diesel engine exhaust, leather dust, formaldehyde, refractory ceramic fibres, respiratory crystalline silica, cadmium and cadmium compounds, benzo(a)pyrene, chromium VI compounds, ethylene oxide, trichloroethylene.

It is not a limitative list: other BOELs are proposed for exposures generated by the combustion but, two exposures are particularly important for firefighters (see demands below in 3).

3. The EPSU Firefighters Network therefore calls to

a) amend the provisions of the directive itself

There are two important points with a positive impact for firefighters

1. the extension of the scope of application to **re-prototoxic substances**
2. the organisation by Member States of a system of life long health surveillance. This would help to detect at an early stage cancers among people who have been exposed as workers.

b) Including binding occupational exposure limits (BOELs)

- A BOEL for diesel exhaust
- A BOEL for benzo(a)pyrene

would contribute to a better cancer prevention among firefighters.

In the case of benzo(a)pyrene, it is clear that the specific aspect for firefighters is that exposure is not generated by the normal process of work but by an exceptional condition- the fire. It does not eliminate the interest of a BOEL but it means that the way to achieve will be different than for "normal" activity. It is about work organization- the distance between the firefighters and the source of exposure and appropriate equipment, including cleaning and maintenance of firefighters equipment. If prevention is better organized at the workplace, information on the risks in the case of fire would be more systematic. When substitution is possible, the elimination of those carcinogens would have also an indirect positive impact for firefighters.

c) not to further curtail and attack pensions rights of firefighters.

Fire combustion contains toxic elements, which can be inspired through mouth, lungs or skin. In particular “hot” fire (e.g. wildfires, chemical fires, etc.) have higher concentration of toxic substances. In “cold” fires other toxic substances are of deadly nature. Therefore, it is not always easy to determine binding occupational limit values (BOELs). However, the length of the exposure to toxic substances is equally important.

4. Actions to be taken by the EPSU Firefighters Network

The EPSU Firefighters Network will support the Action Plan of the Dutch Presidency (2016) which includes the development of risk assessment and demand that employers have to detail their plans for further exposure, aim that exposure reduction is transparent, targeted and enforced by labour inspectorates and to strengthen the role of workers’ representatives involving rights for risk assessment on tasks involving carcinogens performed by employers.²

The EPSU Firefighters Network will support the ETUC/ETUI to address workplace use of carcinogens and work-related cancer and emphasizing the need to include firefighters as a group of workers particularly exposed to carcinogens at the workplace. The objective of the working group is to raise awareness and exchange on research around this issue, and look out for good examples of preventive behaviour.

Additionally, EPSU affiliates should envisage looking at negotiating conditions/agreements with the employers on the concrete details for further exposure reduction at EU, national and local level and exchange further on this issue in the framework of a Working Group. The EU sectoral social dialogue committee local government could look at this issue with EU sectoral employers to raise awareness on the need to fight carcinogens at the workplace.

² Reducing carcinogens at the workplace: lessons from Germany on how to complement substitution.