

FWF guidelines on abrasive blasting

Abrasive blasting is the operation of blasting a stream of abrasive material against a surface under high pressure. There are several variants of the process, such as bead blasting, sandblasting and shot blasting. A common form in the garment industry is sandblasting where in manual sandblasting, compressors are used to stream sand under pressure in order to bleach or batter denim. Sandblasting can also be performed mechanically in blasting cabinets. Exposure to the dust that is released by sandblasting is a serious health hazard for workers in the garment industry. Workers exposed to crystalline silica through sandblasting of denim are at great risk of contracting silicosis, an incurable and often deadly lung disease.

The situation regarding sandblasting is challenging for a number of reasons, including the following:

- a) The necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) for workers is expensive and therefore usually not purchased by garment factories. In addition, workers are reluctant to wear the needed PPE in warm working environments.
- b) Fully closed blasting cabinets that separate workers from dust are rare and expensive. Implementing such machines in the production process generally requires an investment from the factory, which is unlikely to be made without financial support from FWF affiliates.
- c) Scientific research on alternative methods is limited. Some do not have the desired effect on denim. Others may be (almost) equally harmful and dangerous, like PP spray, or require a completely different production method, like hand-sanding. In any case, commitment from both the factory and the FWF affiliate is required.
- d) Awareness among workers regarding health risks is low. FWF affiliates can organise trainings on the risks involved, but it will not reach all workers nor mitigate future risks.
- e) Regular health checks and medical treatment often do not diagnose/treat silicosis. Only in Turkey the medical professionals connect the disease silicosis to the garment industry. The latency period of silicosis is at least six months and in some cases physical damage does not show up on x-rays until years after the patient worked in sandblasting. Moreover, treatment does not necessarily lead to cure, given the potentially severe respiratory problems. In cases of intense or long-term exposure to silica dust, sandblasting may lead to the contraction of the fatal disease silicosis.

For these reasons, FWF adopted a policy against sandblasting in January 2011. It requires FWF affiliates to ban sandblasting throughout their supply chain. Having adopted this policy one and a half years ago, FWF is currently in the process of verifying how affiliates have implemented the ban.

To verify FWF affiliates' implementation of this policy, FWF will:



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- Require from FWF affiliates who produce denim products to draft a policy against sandblasting and include this in their annual work plan for FWF. In the social reports FWF affiliates are required to publicly report on the implementation of the ban.
- In case sandblasting is not being used due to a (temporary) design choice, require that FWF affiliates set up a process that prevents the use of sandblasting in the future.
- Verify and report on efforts by affiliates to eliminate sandblasting through the annual brand performance checks.
- Conduct audits at production sites where sandblasting occurs/has occurred or that form a risk (including subcontractors), to verify if health concerns are properly addressed.
- Ask from affiliates that they investigate at which of their production sites workers may have contracted silicosis or may have been put at risk. If workers in their supply chain have been affected by silicosis, the affiliate should make sure that adequate compensation is provided for the workers and their families, as well as the necessary financial support for medical treatments. The FWF affiliate is responsible for regular health, - and safety routines.
- When alternative production methods are introduced, require that the FWF affiliate performs a risk assessment of these methods and accepts to fully disclose all information related to the health and safety of workers involved. In cooperation with the affiliate, FWF will determine the approach for ensuring safe methods.
- Require from FWF affiliates to produce denim only in factories that do not use any form of sandblasting.