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Government
of South Australia

SafeWork SA

Respirable Crystalline Silica Proactive Compliance Campaign 2023

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Background

The impact of working with respirable crystalline silica (RCS) is a topical issue that is receiving increasing attention due to rising numbers of affected workers. Australia, and other countries, are witnessing a resurgence in diagnoses of silicosis disease in workers in mining, construction and now those who work with engineered stone.

Workplace Exposure Limits (WEL) are available for a number of workplace substances, including RCS. These WELs are airborne concentrations that must not be exceeded at workplaces.

The WEL for RCS in Australia has been reduced to a Time Weighted Average (TWA) of 0.05 mg/m³ over 8 hours, which came into effect in South Australia on 1 July 2020.

A Silicosis Prevention Working Group comprising representatives from SafeWork SA, ReturnToWorkSA, the Mining and Quarrying Occupational Health and Safety Committee (MAQOHSC), and SA Health previously examined what could be done in South Australia to achieve the best possible outcomes for at-risk and vulnerable workers.

This led SafeWork SA to develop a silicosis prevention campaign that included targeted education forums and information dissemination to PCBUs involved in the manufacture and installation of engineered stone benchtops, and the conduct of annual SafeWork SA Inspector audits of workplaces to ensure compliance with work health and safety legislation.

The Respirable Crystalline Silica Proactive Compliance Campaign followed this significant body of work in July 2023.

The campaign

From 3 July 2023 to 31 January 2024, inspectors from SafeWork SA's Manufacturing and Primary Industries (MPI) team conducted 31 audits using the revised RCS Audit Tool.

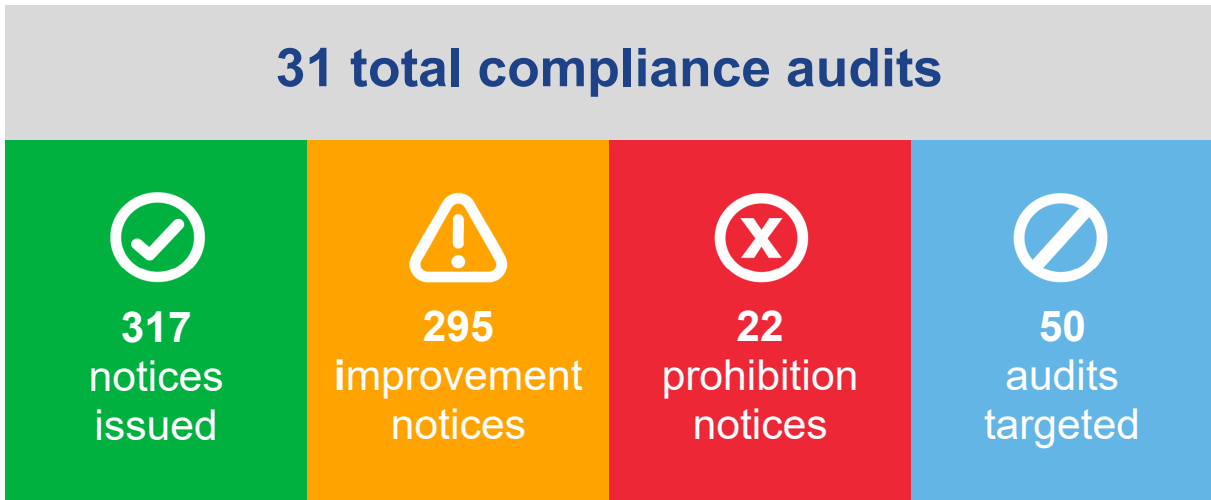
It was identified that a portion of the initial allocated 50 PCBUs were identified as not requiring an audit due to no machining and/or value-added work being carried out on manufactured stone.

A total of 317 statutory notices were issued, consisting of 22 Prohibition Notices and 295 Improvement Notices.

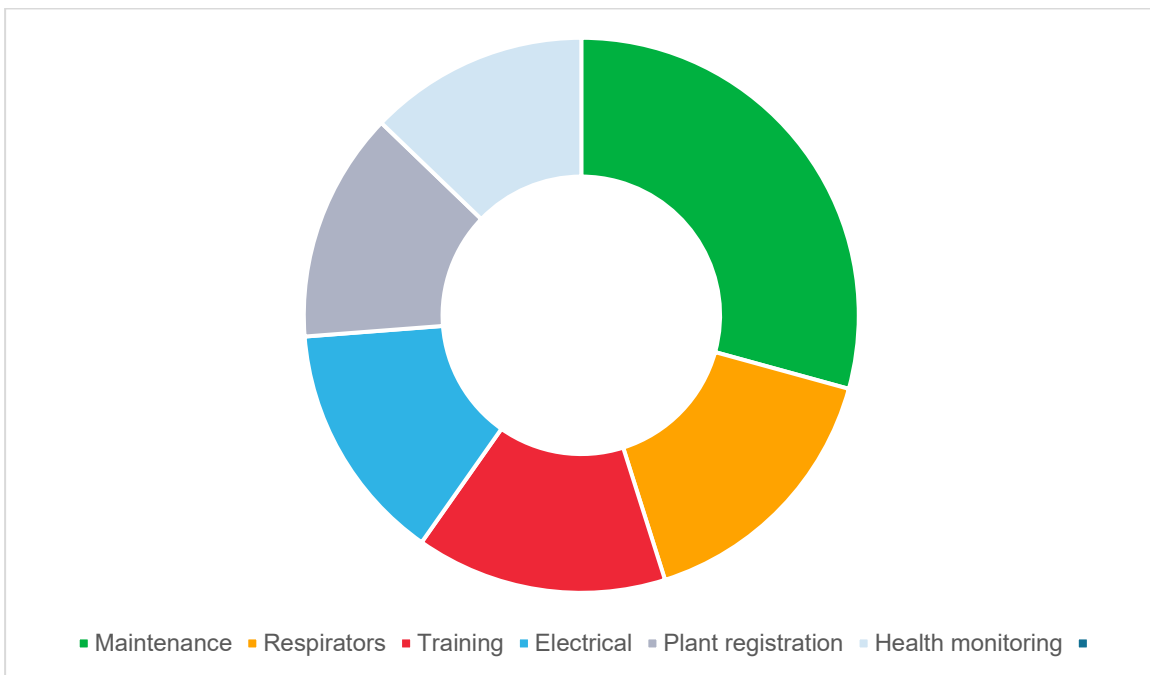
During the campaign period, the following trends were identified:

- There has been a significant increase in the issuing of Statutory Notices compared to the previous RCS Campaigns.

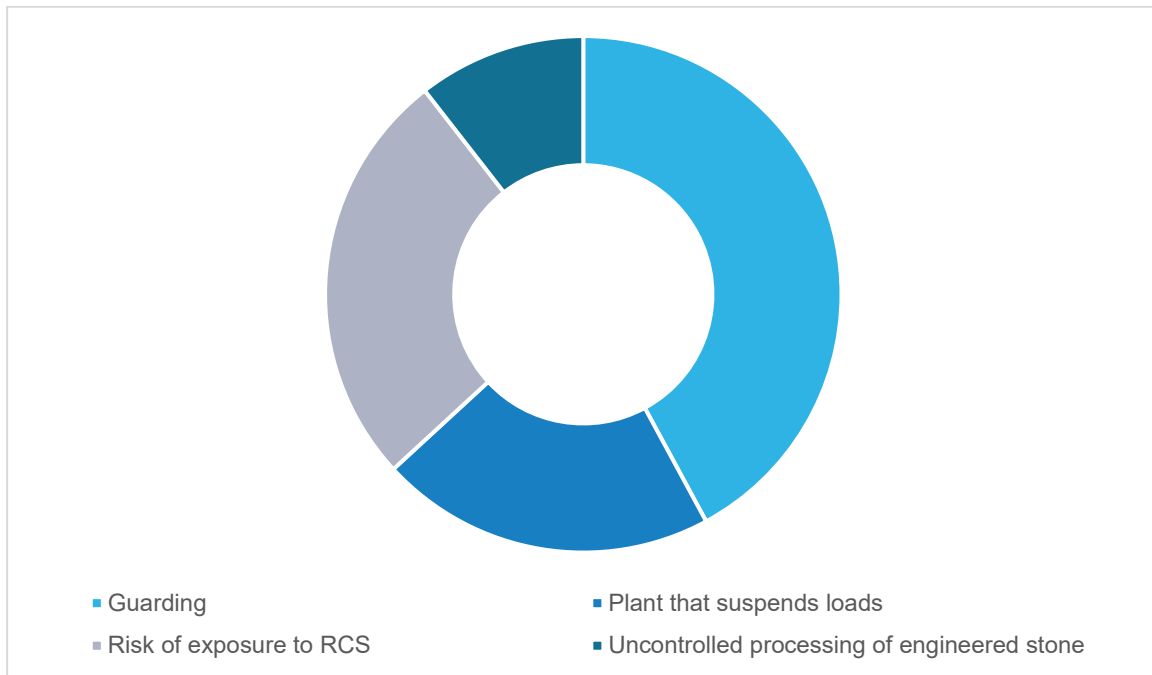
- Safe systems of work for RCS, plant and fixtures/fittings are the biggest contributors to the overall notice count.



Top reasons for Improvement Notices



Top reasons for Prohibition notices



Conclusions & recommendations

There was a significant increase in the number of Statutory Notices issued to PCBUs compared to previous campaigns, which may be a result of the re-designed audit tool ahead of the 2023 campaign.

Safe systems of work for RCS, plant and fixtures/fittings are the biggest contributors to the overall notice count.

It is worth noting that one of the selected PCBUs breached a prohibition notice issued in a previous RCS campaign, leading to further investigation by the Investigation and MPI Teams.

It is recommended that PCBUs provide instruction, information and training to workers about the health risks associated with exposure to RCS, the need for appropriate controls and the application of controls.