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Standard Interpretations - Table of Contents

• **Standard Number:** 1910.23(e)(1); 1910.24(h) ; 1926.1052; 1926.1052(c)(6); 1926.1052(c)(7); 1926.1052(c)

OSHA requirements are set by statute, standards and regulations. Our interpretation letters explain these requirements and how they apply to particular circumstances, but they cannot create additional employer obligations. This letter constitutes OSHA's interpretation of the requirements discussed. Note that our enforcement guidance may be affected by changes to OSHA rules. Also, from time to time we update our guidance in response to new information. To keep apprised of such developments, you can consult OSHA's website at <http://www.osha.gov>.

October 28, 2004

Mr. Helmut Haydl
3710 Sydna Street
Bethlehem, PA 18107

Re: Stair rail and hand rail heights; §1926.1052(c)(6) and 1926.1052(c)(7)

Dear Mr. Haydl:

This is in response to your letter of June 24, 2004 regarding the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards for heights for stair rails and handrails and corresponding building code requirements. We apologize for the delay in providing a response.

We have paraphrased your concern as follows:

Question: Under the construction standards, can a 42-inch-high top rail for a stairway also serve as a handrail, or must a handrail also be provided?

Answer: Section 1926.1052 (Stairways) states:

(c) *Stairrails and handrails.*

* * *

(6) The height of handrails shall be not more than 37 inches (94 cm) nor less than 30 inches (76 cm) from the upper surface of the handrail to the surface of the tread, in line with the face of the riser at the forward edge of the tread.

(7) **When the top edge of a stair rail system also serves as a handrail, the height of the top edge shall be not more than 37 inches** (94 cm) nor less than 36 inches (91.5 cm) from the upper surface of the stair rail system to the surface of the tread, in line with the face of the riser at the forward edge of the tread. [Emphasis added.]

Under these provisions, while construction work is being performed, a separate handrail must be provided if the top rail of a stairway system exceeds 37 inches. Since the top rail you refer to is 42 inches, a separate stair rail would be required. The different height requirements reflect different purposes.

The purpose of the top rail is to prevent workers from falling off the stairway. The purpose of the stair rail is to provide a hand-hold for workers to use if they trip on the stair. If the stair rail is too high, a worker is less likely to be able to reach and grab it if he/she begins to trip. As explained in the preamble to the proposed standard (Volume 51 of the *Federal Register*, Nov. 25, 1986, page 42754), in setting the height limit for stair rails, OSHA relied on a study by the University of Michigan:

...[A] study by the University of Michigan (Ex. 3-6:43) indicates that 33 inches is the optimum height for handrails, and that a variance from this height of plus-or-minus 3 inches is appropriate. Paragraph (c)(6) requires that handrails be between 30 inches and 37 inches in height throughout the length of the stairway...

* * *

Paragraph (c)(7) allows any stairrail system between 36 and 37 inches in height to double as a handrail. OSHA intends the proposed 37-inch upper limit for handrails to provide a measure of flexibility, allowing a 1-inch tolerance for the height of a stairrail that also serves as a handrail. There were no comments on paragraph (c)(7). OSHA has revised paragraph (c)(7) to indicate clearly that stairrails that comply with its terms may also be used as handrails.

While you referenced both General Industry (29 CFR Part 1910) and Construction Industry (Part 1926) provisions, this letter addresses only the standards applicable to the construction industry. The general industry standards you cited, §§1910.23(e)(1) and 1910.24(h), do not apply to construction work; we have forwarded your letter to the Office of General Industry Enforcement for a response regarding those provisions.

We also note that a number of National and State building codes have stair rail (guardrail) and handrail provisions that mirror the OSHA standards set out above.

If you need additional information, please contact us by fax at: U.S. Department of Labor, OSHA, Directorate of Construction, Office of Construction Standards and Guidance, fax # 202-693-1689. You can also contact us by mail at the above office, Room N3468, 200 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20210, although there will be a delay in our receiving correspondence by mail.

Sincerely,

Russell B. Swanson, Director
Directorate of Construction

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