

PRESS RELEASE
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AGTA Announces Project to Combat Rise of Silicosis

June 1, 2016 - Dallas, TX - The American Gem Trade Association announced that the association has initiated a project to combat the rise of silicosis that has led to significant suffering within the colored gemstone industry. President Jeffrey Bilgore appointed an ad hoc committee, headed by AGTA Vice President Bruce Bridges, to do a six month long study to evaluate how the Association could address the problem most effectively. With the study complete Bridges recently reported to the Board of Directors with a pilot project, one that is both workable and affordable. On April 29, the AGTA Board of Directors voted unanimously to proceed with the project.

Silicosis is a debilitating and often fatal disease that results when workers inhale airborne silica dust released during the fashioning of gem materials containing silica. "Workplace silicosis is not unique to the jewelry industry", says AGTA CEO Douglas Hucker. "It is prevalent in hard rock mining, fracking, and particularly pernicious within the construction industries. In our industry it has been a growing problem in gemstone cutting centers, particularly in countries where there is a lack of reliable power and availability of technology that is effective in reducing workers exposure to airborne silica."

"We have heard reports for several years that the problem was growing" states AGTA President Jeff Bilgore, "last year Bruce and I decided to conduct a thorough investigation into how we, as an association, could help in this arena. Bruce, as a miner in Africa, was not only well versed on the risks involved, but has developed close ties with colleagues at the U. S. Mine Safety & Health Administration and several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's). We have approached our friends in both the International Colored Gemstone Association (ICA) and the Indian Diamond and Colorstone Association (IDCA), and they are in full support of and will be cooperating with us in our efforts. No one can force a solution to a long standing health concern. We are committed to working together. It will take education, equipment and all of our efforts to help educate and address this."

"Throughout the process, our colleagues at the U.S. Mine Safety & Health Administration advised us on the feasibility of our plan as it came

together. Drawing on the assistance of the committed volunteers at several NGO's, notably the Workplace Without Borders, we were able to blend our expertise with their experience in working with artisanal communities in Africa, China and India, to envision a workable plan for attacking this problem" says Bruce Bridges.

"Based upon the response that we received from the US government and our friends in civil society, we are ready to move forward with implementation of our pilot projects with some test facilities in India," states Bilgore. A variety of methods to reduce the hazards of silica exposure have been investigated and which method, or combination of methods, will depend upon the conditions that exist in the test facilities in the cutting community.

Along with the funding of equipment, AGTA is also working with NGO's who have experience in this arena to develop and refine educational materials such as pictograph brochures and native language videos that can be distributed to support the use and necessity of the abatement equipment.

"We hope to launch the program early next year" says Hucker. "Thanks to the Board of Directors we have the initial funding in place but there is still some refining and logistical planning to be completed. After several years of debate and discussion we are well on our way to getting this industry wide effort off the planning table and into the implementation stage."

Any individuals or groups who would like to inquire about providing support for this effort should contact Douglas Hucker, AGTA CEO, at 800-972-1162 or at info@agta.org.

The American Gem Trade Association is a not-for-profit Association serving the natural colored gemstone and cultured pearl industry since 1981. The AGTA serves the industry as "The Authority in Color" and has it's headquarter office in Dallas, Texas.

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