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Urgent call for National Register for Respirators to protect Australian and New Zealand workers.

A coalition of workplace health and safety related organisations across Australia and New Zealand, and the ACTU called today for the urgent establishment of a register for approved respirators (aka face masks). The group describes the presence of non-compliant, fake and faulty disposable masks as an immediate threat to the health and safety of workers.

At the launch of the coalition's new *Guide to Buying P2, or Equivalent, Respirators for use in the Australian & New Zealand Work Environment*, Andrew Orfanos, President of the Australian Institute of Occupational Hygienists, said there was an immediate and urgent case for the Federal government to intervene to protect Australians' health.

"The situation is out of hand. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic our market has been flooded with more than 100 million respirators of different types and standards, and amongst the suitable products are fake, faulty, counterfeit and sub-standard products. Australian businesses are rightly confused about which ones are suitable. They need to know what they're buying, and the government needs to get a handle on this issue" he said.

Mr. Orfanos explained that the guide has been developed to help businesses navigate their way through what is a messy issue, before purchasing face masks. However, he warned "the Guide will help, but it's not enough. We need national leadership. Fixing the problem is straightforward if the government chooses to act. We need a register and an approval process which is properly regulated" he said.

Naomi Kemp, Chair of the Australian Institute of Health and Safety also explained, "Most people make an assumption that if they find a face mask for sale in Australia, that it has been assessed and met a standard. This is not true. Too many groups are taking advantage of a voluntary system and creating confusion. This is bad for the genuine, reputable suppliers, it's bad for the businesses that purchase the products, and it's bad for the people who use them" she said. "Businesses need protection from the risks of using faulty equipment, and workers need protection for their health" she said.

Ms. Kemp went on to say that the dangers of unapproved respirators extend beyond the risks of exposure to, and transmission of COVID-19. "We already had major problems with last season's bushfires, and we are still seeing cases of black lung and silicosis which cause workplace deaths. With the flood of new products onto the market, we now have fake and non-conforming face masks potentially being misused in these environments as well."

Liam O'Brien Assistant secretary ACTU said "The pandemic has focussed attention on masks as an essential piece of protective equipment with huge potential to save lives and prevent transmission. However, it has also made clear that regulation of PPE is grossly inadequate to ensure that the masks that Australian workers are using are up to the task."

"Australian workers, whether they need a mask to protect themselves from COVID-19 or other workplace hazards like silica dust, should be able to rely on a simple set of standards which make it clear which masks are safe to use. Without clear and simple regulation on this issue, Australian workers and the community at large will continue to be put at risk" he said.

Contributing organisations and spokespersons:

The Australian Institute of Occupational Hygienists (AIOH)

The Australian Institute of Occupational Hygienists (AIOH) was established in 1980 and is the largest organisation representing professionals working in occupational hygiene in Australia. Our mission is to promote healthy workplaces and protect the health of Australian workers through application of the knowledge, practice and standing of occupational health and occupational hygiene.

Spokesperson: Andrew Orfanos, President. PH: 0478 303 031

The Australian Institute of Health & Safety (AIHS)

About the AIHS: The Australian Institute of Health and Safety is the national association for the health and safety profession, representing thousands of health and safety practitioners and professionals working throughout Australian industry to keep Australian business healthy, safe and productive.

Spokesperson: Naomi Kemp, Chairperson. PH: 0488 055 021

The Indoor Air Quality Association Australia (IAQAA)

Established in 1995, the Indoor Air Quality Association (IAQA) is dedicated to bringing practitioners together to prevent and solve indoor environmental problems for the benefit of consumers and the public.

Spokesperson: Dr Claire Bird, President. PH: 0431 988 035

The New Zealand Occupational Hygiene Society (NZOHS)

The New Zealand Occupational Hygiene Society is a network of occupational hygiene professionals who further the practice, professionalism and recognition of the industry in New Zealand.

Spokesperson: Carol McSweeney, President.

Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU)

The Australian Council of Trade Unions is the peak body for Australian unions, made up of 38 affiliated unions who together represent about 1.8 million workers and their families.

Spokesperson: Liam O'Brien Deputy secretary.