

Feds: WY Workplace Fatalities 3 Times Average

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CHEYENNE, Wyo. (AP) — A federal official who's been studying Wyoming's high rate of workplace fatalities said the state needs to foster an environment where workers regard following safety procedures as proof of their professionalism, not as a sign of weakness.

Dr. George A. Conway, director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in Alaska, has been studying Wyoming worker fatality issues.

Conway, who worked as a doctor in Wyoming in the mid-1980s, said getting workers to understand the importance of work place safety is particularly important, "in ornery cultures like Alaska and Wyoming."

Gov. Dave Freudenthal created a task force to address work place safety issues early this year. In 2007, worker fatalities in Wyoming were more than 17 deaths per 100,000 workers — more than three times the national average.

Occupational fatalities in Wyoming decreased 31 percent from 2007 to 2008, according to a report issued last month by the state Department of Employment. It reported that the number of occupational fatalities dropped from 48 in 2007 to 33 in 2008.

Gary Hartman, a Freudenthal adviser and former district judge, is leading the task force. He said Thursday that the group called on federal officials from Alaska to lend their expertise because that state has seen sharp reductions in fatalities in its hazardous commercial fishing and helicopter logging industries.

Conway said Alaska used to have one of the highest work place fatality rates in the country but has cut it in half in recent years.

One successful program in Alaska used veteran ship captains who had credibility among younger workers to stress the importance of safety procedures and proper use of equipment, Conway said. He said the fishing industry largely has moved away from the heavy drinking and drug use that had previously defined it.

Dr. Paul Anderson, also of Alaska's occupational safety office, said he looked at 87 deaths on Wyoming's highways and 54 reports from the Wyoming occupational safety office about deaths on job sites that occurred in the state from 2003 to 2007.

The typical profile of a worker killed in a traffic accident in Wyoming would be a middle-aged white male driving a semitrailer or a pickup, Anderson said. About half the victims are from out of state.

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Fatal accidents typically occur on rural interstate highways in clear weather while the driver is speeding, distracted or fatigued and not wearing their seat belt, Anderson said.

In looking at fatalities on oil and gas sites and on construction projects in Wyoming, Anderson said victims were also typically middle-aged males. He said nearly half are killed by coming into contact with equipment or other objects and said 17 percent are killed in falls.

In job site fatalities, Anderson said safety procedures were in place on 70 percent of the jobs, but weren't followed 98 percent of the time. He said fall protection devices weren't used in any of the fall fatalities he looked at.

Hartman said he found it interesting that while the state has been emphasizing the importance of having safety programs, the data Anderson presented showed that in most fatal accidents workers hadn't been following established safety procedures.

The task force formed committees to look into work place safety issues in the oil and gas industry, the transportation industry and the construction industry.

It also set up a committee to consider data collection. Hartman said he expects it will meet again in January. He said it's too early to say if the group will recommend state legislation to address the issue.

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