



Technical Advisory Council

Item 10: Labor and Climate Intersections

August 22, 2025

Introduction

Climate change is not only an environmental challenge but also a human and workers' rights issue as climate hazards disproportionately harm workers, especially agricultural workers, migrants, and people in the informal economy. Extreme heat and wildfire smoke in particular are becoming increasingly frequent and severe across California. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights specifically calls out "provisions in ... occupational safety and health regulations to prevent and avoid work and occupational risks related to climate change" in a recent opinion "concerning State obligations in response to the climate emergency within the framework of international human rights law."¹ During the European heatwave in July, many regions across Italy banned all outdoor labor from 12:30 to 4pm.²

Worksafe

Worksafe is a California-based organization dedicated to promoting and protecting the basic right of all people to a safe and healthy workplace. They do this through policy advocacy, legal services and training, movement building, and public outreach.

- Worksafe advocates for strong occupational safety and health (OSH) protections for workers – particularly low-income, immigrant, and contingent workers. They are a leading voice monitoring and addressing OSH rulemaking at Cal/OSHA and the Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board.
- The organization promotes access to justice for low-wage and immigrant workers by providing free legal training and technical assistance to legal aid programs, worker advocacy groups, and unions.

¹ https://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/opiniones/seriea_32_en.pdf (para. 445); see Gibson Dunn, *Client Alert: Inter-American Court of Human Rights Issues Advisory Opinion on State Obligations Regarding Climate Change*, <https://www.gibsondunn.com/inter-american-court-of-human-rights-issues-advisory-opinion-on-state-obligations-regarding-climate-change/>

² <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/climate-energy/france-shuts-schools-heatwave-grips-europe-sea-off-spain-record-high-2025-07-01/>; the diversity of heat impacts is illustrated by this close look at a variety of occupations coping with the July heatwave: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/05/stories-from-six-countries-europe-extreme-heat>

- Worksafe is a leader in several statewide coalitions, partnering with organizations from multiple sectors to ensure that all workers can access safe, healthy, and fair work.
- They raise awareness about occupational health and safety to help people better understand the connections between work and health and strive to build collective understanding of how workplace exposures intersect with broader public health and social justice issues.

Worksafe is engaged in a number of climate-related campaigns, including heat hazards, wildfire smoke, and the increasing prevalence of aerosol transmissible diseases like COVID.

Heat Hazards

Heat is considered one of the deadliest climate-change driven hazards. A 2021 study of 18 years of California workers' compensation records found that the risk of all workplace injuries was five to seven percent higher when the temperature was between 85 and 90 degrees. When temperatures were over 100 degrees, the overall risk of injuries was 10 to 15 percent greater.³ These injuries - more falls, crashes, cuts taking place on the job as a result of high heat - are not captured in the data as they are not routinely recorded as heat injuries. One study estimates that heat likely sickens, or contributes to injuries among, at least 15,000 California workers each year.⁴ Outdoor workers have a heightened risk of these injuries due to extreme heat.

Wildfire Smoke

California's groundbreaking workplace protections from wildfire smoke date to 2019.⁵ The impacts of increasing wildfires stretch far beyond direct burn areas. In fact, by far the most pervasive impacts of wildfires are the health impacts of wildfire smoke. Some populations are particularly vulnerable, such as unsheltered residents and outdoor workers, who lack the ability to shelter indoors during extreme smoke events.⁶ In particular, farmworkers are heavily impacted in California, with its labor-intensive agricultural harvesting near high-fire-

³ <https://worksafeca.medium.com/we-can-do-more-to-protect-workers-from-high-heat-8e25c88fbbe4>

⁴ <https://www.capradio.org/articles/2021/08/25/why-california-workers-are-still-dying-from-heat-despite-protections/>

⁵ <https://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/doshreg/Protection-from-Wildfire-Smoke/Wildfire-smoke-emergency-standard.html>

⁶ Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker Health, Rural Health Information Hub (March 17, 2025) <https://www.ruralhealthinfo.org/topics/migrant-health>; See also at Sally Hargreaves et al., *Occupational Health Outcomes Among International Migrant Workers: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis*, 7 *The Lancet Glob. Health*, e872, e975 (2019) (discussing two studies with similar outcomes - studies of agricultural workers assessing distinct outcomes such as pulmonary function and respiratory symptoms, which Flunker and colleagues reported in 79% of workers).

risk areas.⁷ Agricultural work is more likely than other outdoor work sectors like construction to continue during wildfire emergencies in order to prevent potential crop loss.

Farmworkers are among the most vulnerable workforces in the state, often facing linguistic isolation limiting access to safety information, exclusion from much of the safety net due to immigration status, overall economic insecurity and dependence on seasonal income, low rates of healthcare access, and preexisting health disparities such as respiratory issues from dust and pesticide exposure.⁸

Aerosol Transmissible Diseases

Worksafe was at the forefront of designing and advocating for standards for the COVID-19 virus in 2020, as well as earlier protections enacted for health care workers.

Experts have warned that the likelihood of pandemics of this nature will only continue to grow in the coming years, and to this end, Worksafe is advocating for the implementation of an Aerosol Transmissible Disease standard to enable all workplaces to respond swiftly and effectively and prevent workers from contracting and spreading serious diseases such as COVID.

Discussion Questions

- How can California better integrate labor issues and agencies into its leading environmental climate change processes and programs?
- Given the imbalance of power in the workplace, what role should the State play in pursuing equitable protections for communities impacted by climate change?

⁷ Rosana Aguilera et al., *Wildfire Smoke Impacts Respiratory Health More than Fine Particles from Other Sources: Observational Evidence from Southern California*, 12 Nat Commun 1493, at 4 (2021) (discussing how wildfire-specific PM2.5 can cause a greater impact on respiratory health than PM2.5 from other sources).

⁸ https://worksafe.org/file_download/inline/a03d2988-c29a-474c-a716-518c79c1f0ee