Workers' Comp

A warming world poses increased risks for many workers

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When environmental calamities unspool their destruction, we often focus on the numbers—acres burned, wind speeds, height of floodwaters. The coming years are likely to draw into focus another metric: workers injured by natural disasters.

As the planet grows warmer and weather patterns more volatile, many workers will face increased risks from an army of environmental hazards. This new reality will require fresh thinking about how to better protect workers and, in some cases, how to reconfigure work itself to knock down the most perilous threats.

The dangers aren't limited to the obvious groups, such as those who work outdoors in hot climates. The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) warns numerous portions of the labor force could face heightened risk from changes in climate. These include first responders, health care workers, fire fighters, utility workers, farmers, manufacturing workers, and transportation workers. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) offers its own rundown of at-risk groups that includes ranchers, commercial fishermen, and construction workers.

The CDC further points out that certain vulnerable groups will confront heighted risks in a hotter world. That's because these groups—migrant workers and day laborers among them—already must grapple with the fallout from housing insecurity and "other social and economic" constraints that can worsen when temperatures start to climb.

Increased natural disasters exacerbate challenges and risk

Higher temperatures can, not surprisingly, lead to an increased number of incidents such as heat stroke and heat exhaustion, according to the EPA. The agency adds that conditions such as heat stress and the accompanying fatigue can reduce workers' alertness, which then can raise the chance of getting hurt on the job. Researchers suggest that worries about a climate-fueled disaster itself, such as a flood that destroys a worker's home, can interfere with the worker's ability to concentrate and work safely.

As environmental challenges grow more onerous, so do the conditions in which some emergency workers must operate. The EPA notes that as floods, fires, storms, and droughts increase because of climate change, there is a corresponding increase in the number of times first responders must wade into disaster zones. We've witnessed this with the wildfires that have scorched the western U.S. in recent years; the conflagrations have led to injuries

and even deaths among firefighters.

Even those workers who aren't battling menacing challenges like wildfires can still be at risk. Consider those who labor indoors without sufficient ventilation or air conditioning. This might include people who work in spaces with unmistakable hazards, such as steel mills, but also those who work in more commonplace settings such as warehouses and restaurant kitchens.

The Natural Resources Defense Council points to perhaps-surprising jobs that are exposed to climate risk such as teachers and home health care workers. Such work often occurs in buildings that are older or not well maintained. The environmental nonprofit also links mental health challenges to a changing climate and calls on the federal government to pull together plans for addressing the risks workers face from climate change.

Some of the pitfalls workers encounter go beyond catastrophic events that often are short-lived, according to the EPA. Some of these challenges persist as everyday hazards. These could include a rise in the number of insects that transport Lyme disease or West Nile virus and even illnesses that might spread more readily in water or food.

This range of challenges will prove threatening in financial terms, too. Higher temperatures are likely to cut into worker productivity and slash more than $2 trillion from the global economy by 2030.

Exploring new ways to make workers safe

As myriad climate hurdles arise, employers, healthcare workers, and government officials will need to find new ways to help educate workers about the risks they face and to identify strategies for adapting. In one study, researchers recommend that employers look at factors that include providing hydration for workers, boosting rest periods, introducing heat-warning systems, and trying to mechanize some job functions.

The results of a changing climate might bear down unevenly, though there's no doubt that a warming world will require new measures to keep workers everywhere safe.



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