



## WORKPLACE SAFETY

# PROTECT OUTDOOR WORKERS FROM WILDFIRE SMOKE

**T**HE MASSIVE destruction of the Los Angeles wildfires serves as a reminder that if you have outdoor workers that are affected by wildfire smoke, Cal/OSHA requires you to take steps to protect them against unhealthy air quality.

Wildfire smoke contains a number of harmful pollutants but the main danger to anyone outside in smoky conditions is particulate matter, which can lodge in the lungs. As well, with these fires, there are a lot of chemicals and other toxic fumes in the smoke from burning cars, tires, treated lumber, and more.

Under Cal/OSHA regulations, if the air quality index (AQI) reaches 150 or higher (for particulate matter known as PM2.5) employers have three options for protecting their workers.

### Options for protecting workers

- Change the worksite to a safer location,
- Alter work duties or schedule to reduce time in unhealthy air, or
- Provide respirators like N95 masks and encourage their use.

If the AQI breaches 500, employees are required to wear respirators. To better understand how poor air quality affects health, you can get more details at the Environmental Protection Agency's AirNow website. There are a number of websites that track AQI, including AirNow and local air quality management district websites.

### Training

The regulations also require employers to hold staff training on:

- How to properly use N95 masks,
- The health danger of wildfire smoke, and
- The steps you are taking to protect them from wildfire smoke.

The Cal/OSHA standard also requires employers to:

- Alert workers when the air quality is harmful and what protective measures are available to employees.
- Encourage employees to inform supervisors if they notice the air quality is getting worse, or if they are suffering from any symptoms due to the air quality, without fear of reprisal.

### Exempt workplaces

- Buildings or structures in which the air is filtered and the employer ensures that windows, doors, bays and other openings are kept closed, except when entering or exiting.
- Enclosed vehicles in which the air is filtered and the employer ensures that windows, doors and other openings are kept closed, except entering or exiting the vehicle.
- Employers may also be exempt if they can prove that the AQI at their workplace is not 150 or above, or if it is only above 150 for less than an hour.

### Steps to take during wildfires

Monitor the AQI in the area your employees are working. This can be from online sources or by using your own equipment. Search for AQI monitors online to find one that fits your needs and budget.

Communicate to workers the importance of taking precautions when the AQI hits 150 and what protective measures are available.

If you plan to encourage the use of N95 masks (that you provide), tell workers that surgical masks or items worn over the nose and mouth — such as scarves, T-shirts and bandannas — will not provide protection against wildfire smoke.

A final word about evacuation zones. It's illegal for employers to retaliate against workers who refuse to work in evacuation zones. ❖