

Winter weather increases job hazards

Oregon OSHA offers tips for employers

(Salem) – Snow, ice, and rain are winter hazards that can make day-to-day duties even more dangerous for workers. The Oregon Occupational Health and Safety Division (Oregon OSHA) encourages employers to plan ahead to protect lives and reduce accidents this season.

In January 2004, the Portland area was hit with a severe winter storm that brought snow and freezing rain, turning streets into slick skating rinks. Workers' compensation data shows disabling claims (at least three days of missed work) spiked due to falls on wet surfaces and ice that January, making up 14 percent of the total claims that month. The trend is consistent with winter months that followed, when slips and falls often coincide with weather events.

In 2005, a lumberyard worker was in the process of strapping a semi-trailer load of lumber in Portland. He climbed the ladder, placed against the side of the trailer, to strap the top of the load. When he stepped from the ladder onto the load, he slipped and fell about 11 feet to the asphalt below. Ice was found on top of the plastic covering the load and no fall protection was used. He later died from head and neck injuries.

"Unfortunately, we often make our plans without taking into account bad weather, which means typical winter weather in much of the state," said Michael Wood, administrator of Oregon OSHA. "Work practices that are just fine during dry weather when visibility is good may not be nearly as effective in rain, fog, or early darkness, and equipment that presents no problems when it's dry can be treacherous when the rains come or temperatures drop below freezing."

Oregon OSHA encourages employers to take the following precautions:

- Keep walkways clear from ice and snow and provide entry mats to avoid indoor slips.
- Review bad-weather procedures with employees and discuss specific job hazards.
- Prepare a roadside emergency kit for company vehicles that includes items such as water, food, flares, a blanket, window scraper, and tire chains (when required).

More information about emergency preparedness can be found on Oregon OSHA's Web site, www.orosha.org, under "Publications" or in the December issue of Oregon OSHA's online newsletter