

Wildfire recovery: OHS information for workers

What you need to know:

- In general, Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) laws apply to all workers, including volunteers and waged non-family farm and ranch workers.
- There are specific exceptions when working on your own home and for farm and ranch workers.
- Call the OHS Contact Centre if you have questions or concerns:

1-800-415-8690

What do I do after the fire?

Before you go back to work, your employer must ensure fire-damaged buildings are structurally safe to enter before workers enter the structure. This includes getting advice from a qualified professional, such as a structural engineer.

Fire may create new hazards like contamination from harmful substances on surfaces, soot or exposure of hazardous building materials such as asbestos and blockages.

The burning of building material, house contents, vehicles, asphalt or other materials may also create harmful substances.

You should also be aware that areas of the building not previously considered “restricted spaces” or “confined spaces” may now fall into these categories due to restricted or impeded access from the fire damage.

Electrical systems may also be damaged; your employer must ensure electrical hazards are controlled before the power to the building is turned back on.

Should I be concerned about air quality at work?

Outdoor workers and those performing strenuous activities are most exposed; however, workers in any number of jobs may be exposed to wildfire smoke or other airborne contaminants.

The health effects can range from eye, nose and throat irritation to reduced lung function, bronchitis, and intensify pre-existing medical conditions like asthma.

How reduced air quality affects health depends on factors such as the length of exposure, age, current health state and the type of smoke.

Wildfire recovery: information for workers

Can workers start clean-up work right away?

Before any restoration or demolition work begins, your employer must conduct a hazard assessment and then ensure the properly qualified companies are retained to assist with the work.

Everyone is eager to get back to work and start rebuilding Fort McMurray. Working safely the first time to prevent incidents and injuries will help the process go smoothly.

I am in one of the at-risk categories identified by the Chief Medical Officer. Am I obligated to return to work?

A sample health screening questionnaire is available online at work.alberta.ca/OHSwildfires. If you answer yes to any of the screening questions, get clearance from their doctor prior to returning to work.

I am not in the at-risk category, but I'm not comfortable returning because of air quality or other health concerns. Am I required to return to work?

You should talk to your employer about your concerns and safety at your work site. Your employer should have the proper PPE available at your work site. Air quality conditions can change rapidly and you may find you need respirators or other safety equipment at a moment's notice, or you may not need them at all.

You can refuse work if it is an imminent danger and you cannot be dismissed or disciplined for doing so. If you raise a safety concern that is not an imminent danger, your employer must immediately address the concern and take steps to fix any safety issues.

You should also check with Alberta Employment Standards to discuss your options in a situation where you not wish to return to work. Call Employment Standards at 1-877-427-3731.

Wildfire recovery: information for workers

Can I refuse fire clean-up work due to “imminent danger”?

Yes. “Imminent danger” refers to any danger that is not normal for that worker’s occupation. Asking a worker to perform clean-up or restoration activities that are not normally part of their job may create an imminent danger situation. For example, asking workers to remove damaged building materials that contain asbestos when they have not been provided with training and the correct protective equipment.

Workers must not perform any job or operate any equipment if they believe there is or will be imminent danger. When a worker notifies their employer that he or she refuses to do a job due to a belief that there is imminent danger, the employer is required to assess and eliminate the imminent danger situation. The worker may be temporarily sent to another job and will not lose their pay.

Asking a worker to work in a situation of imminent danger is against the law. A worker cannot be disciplined for refusing to do work due to a belief that there is imminent danger. Workers have the right to call or write to an Occupational Health and Safety Officer if they believe they have been disciplined or fired because they refused to perform a job due to a belief that there was imminent danger.

If you are not sure if a situation is an imminent danger, call the OHS Contact Centre to discuss the situation.

I have refused work citing imminent danger. What happens next?

Your employer must immediately investigate and take action to eliminate the imminent danger situation. Your employer must ensure no worker is assigned to the same equipment or work unless either:

- The worker assigned is not exposed to the imminent danger, or
- The imminent danger has been eliminated.

Your employer may temporarily send you to another job, but at no loss of pay.

Your employer is required to document your notification in writing, their investigation, and what actions they took. Your employer must give you copy of the written report.

Your employer cannot dismiss or discipline you for refusing unsafe work. This includes cutting your hours or “blacklisting” you. When you refuse work citing imminent danger, document everything that happens before and after you refuse the work. OHS will investigate any complaint of being dismissed or disciplined for refusing unsafe work that is an imminent danger.

Wildfire recovery: information for workers

How do I know if air quality at my workplace is affected?

The Air Quality Health Index (AQHI) provides information on the relative health risk associated with air quality in Alberta. The higher the AQHI number, the greater the risk and need to take precautions. The AQHI is updated hourly and can be accessed online.

Occupational exposure limits are legal limits included in the Alberta Occupational Health and Safety legislation intended to protect most workers from the health effects from exposure to hazardous substances over a work day. These limits are different than the standards for public health. If workers need to work in wildfire areas, the employer must ensure that occupational exposure limits are not exceeded. Workers may need to be provided with protective equipment, such as respirators, if they need to work in areas where these limits may be exceeded.

Does poor air quality constitute an imminent danger for workers?

Not necessarily, but your employer is required to put appropriate controls in place (such as respirators and other protective equipment) and have procedures to be followed when air quality is poor.

Air quality changes continually. Areas impacted by smoke will change based on wind direction and fire location. When workers are asked to mobilize to these areas, employers must ensure workers have the required protective equipment and know what the safe work procedures are.

How can I ensure occupational exposure limits are not being exceeded at my work site?

Eliminating or preventing any exposure is the best way to protect health. When employers cannot eliminate the hazard and have exposed workers, they should assess the hazard, determine what controls they have in place and outline how they will control potential worker exposure. Monitoring the AQHI online will give you a general idea of the air quality in your area.

Wildfire recovery: information for workers

What are some controls that can be used to protect workers from airborne contaminants?

- If your work is not critical and can be moved to an area where smoke levels are lower, consider relocating or rescheduling until air quality conditions improve.
- Reduce levels of physical activity, as necessary, to decrease inhaling pollutants.
- Pay attention to warnings - public health warnings apply to you and should be followed.
- When in your vehicle, keep the windows closed - the air system should be set on recirculate so smoky air doesn't get inside.
- When driving through an area with low or no smoke, let outside air into your vehicle.
- Drink water and stay hydrated to help ensure your nose and mouth are moist.
- If you have chest tightness, chest pain, or shortness of breath, call 9-1-1 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.
- If you have unusual tiredness, contact a community health nurse or your doctor - do this even if you don't have a heart or lung problem.
- If you have an emergency, call 911 or for general health information, call Health Link at 811.
- When administrative controls are unable to reduce exposures to acceptable levels, Canadian Standard Association approved respiratory equipment may be used.

What should employers be doing to protect workers doing clean-up work?

- Employers should make sure workers are wearing appropriate protective equipment (respirators, footwear, and clothing) that is easy to clean or dispose of.
- If respirators are required, the worker must be fit tested for the equipment and be medically fit to wear it during work.
- If diesel-powered equipment is needed, the exhaust must be ventilated out of the work site to prevent the build-up of contaminants such as carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides and diesel particulate.
- Since workers will be doing manual tasks in warm environments while wearing protective equipment, the employer should have procedures in place to address heat stress. The employer should ensure workers are not impaired by fatigue.
- Finally, the employer must ensure workers can decontaminate themselves and their protective equipment, tools and other equipment.
- Workers must not eat, drink or smoke in the work area; the employer should designate a separate area for these activities once workers have been able to decontaminate.

Wildfire recovery: information for workers

Should I be concerned about asbestos?

There are a wide variety of building materials in which asbestos was historically used; these materials remain in place in many structures in Alberta. Some examples include stucco, plaster, drywall mud, flooring materials, ceiling tiles and insulation.

If a structure was built prior to 1990, there is a potential for asbestos-containing materials to be present. It's not possible to confirm if a structure contains asbestos by visual examination; a proper survey must be done and samples of the building materials collected and analyzed for asbestos content. This must be done before renovation or demolition activities begin.

If renovations are done in a structure containing asbestos, the asbestos-containing materials in the area of the renovation must be enclosed, encapsulated or removed prior to the renovation. If a structure is to be demolished, the asbestos-containing materials must be removed prior to demolition.

I am working as a volunteer. Do OHS laws apply to me?

The *Occupational Health and Safety Act* applies to all workers, including volunteers, with the exception of:

- non-waged or family farm workers; or
- those working on their own home.

Organizations coordinating the use of volunteers must ensure volunteers have the appropriate equipment and training to perform the tasks that they have volunteered for.

Volunteers should:

- identify hazards before they start working;
- not do work they are not trained to do;
- wear proper safety equipment; and
- ask questions or speak up if they are concerned something is unsafe.

Wildfire recovery: information for workers

What are employers' obligations under Alberta Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) legislation?

The Alberta *OHS Act* applies to most employers and workers in Alberta. The employer has an overall obligation to protect the health and safety of all workers on their work site. In turn, workers must ensure their health and safety and the health and safety of others around them. In addition, the employer must:

- conduct a hazard assessment and ensure that the appropriate controls are available and in place to protect workers who may be working in fire damaged buildings or involved in remediation activities;
- develop safe work procedures and provide training to workers on these procedures. Workers must participate in this training;
- ensure that all equipment used at the work site is in proper working condition and used in accordance with the manufacturer specifications or specifications certified by a professional engineer;
- assess the potential exposure of workers who may be exposed to harmful substances. If there is an occupational exposure limit listed in the OHS legislation for a substance present at the work site, the employer must ensure that exposure does not exceed the occupational exposure limit;
- ensure that the personal protective equipment selected is appropriate for the hazards at the work site and meets the listed standards;
- if respiratory protective equipment is required, ensure that it is NIOSH approved, workers are fit tested for the equipment and workers are clean shaven where the equipment seals to the skin of the face if the effectiveness of the equipment depends on a facial seal; and
- ensure workers have a way to properly decontaminate themselves, protective clothing, tools and equipment before they leave the work site.

Depending on the nature of the work site and the activities to be done, the OHS legislation may have additional specific requirements that must be followed.

© 2016 Government of Alberta, Labour

This material may be used, reproduced, stored or transmitted for non-commercial purposes. The source of this material must be acknowledged when publishing or issuing it to others. This material is not to be used, reproduced, stored or transmitted for commercial purposes without written permission from the Government of Alberta, Ministry of Labour. This material is to be used for information purposes only. No warranty express or implied is given as to the accuracy or the timeliness of the material presented. In case of any inconsistency between this document and the Occupational Health and Safety Legislation, the legislation will always prevail.

Contact Us

OHS Contact Centre

Edmonton & Surrounding area

- 780-415-8690

Throughout Alberta

- 1-866-415-8690

Deaf or hearing impaired:

- 780-427-9999 (Edmonton)
- 1-800-232-7215 (Alberta)

Website

work.alberta.ca/ohs