

MPR News | Minnesota Now In extreme heat, constructions workers still report for duty. How they're staying safe 01KXGZB03DR62P6541ZYDKPS11

NINA MOINI: Just before 8:00 this morning, the temperature was already pushing 80 degrees near downtown St. Paul, where Michael New was working on construction at the John Ireland Bridge. He wears long sleeves, a face mask, and sunglasses on days like this.

MICHAEL NEW: And me personally, I recommend keeping your skin covered so the sun isn't beating on your skin. Wear wicking material. I prefer the face mask, just to keep the sun off of me. And then that way, this thing, as soon as the air hits it, it dries up, cools. Feels like AC's on.

NINA MOINI: New says he plans to drink a lot of water and get in the shade when he can. He and other outdoor workers in farming, forestry, delivery, and construction will be outside in the extreme heat this week. I recently talked with someone who works to help employers in construction adopt safer practices around heat and other hazards. Stacy Arnold is director of safety for the Associated General Contractors of Minnesota.

STACY ARNOLD: So we represent commercial contractors through both the vertical building world as well as the horizontal, heavy highway, and utility world.

NINA MOINI: Hmm. OK, so a wide range. So you got to work with state regulators, too, on an incentive program for contractors called Construction Health And Safety Excellence, or CHASE. Tell us a little bit about how that works.

STACY ARNOLD: So it's a partnership between Minnesota OSHA Compliance and the Associated General Contractors of Minnesota.

It's a nationwide trade organization, and we have a Minnesota chapter here. So the CHASE partnership, our members can voluntarily choose to participate in it. And I administrate that, qualifying them based on the maturity of their safety programs, ultimately looking for contractors willingly participating in best practices that go above and beyond safety regulations.

And as a benefit of participating in that program, they get various incentives with the state, which includes our cooperative compliance partnership projects where contractors can put projects in the program, and Minnesota OSHA Compliance and myself voluntarily walk those projects every four weeks, just really looking for those best practices in the field.

NINA MOINI: And what are some of those practices you recommend when it comes to heat?

STACY ARNOLD: So kind of bare minimum. What we look for with contractors is they need to be providing water and shade a lot, provide electrolytes for the workforce. But that's often not really enough. Acclimatization is super important for the workforce to be able to adjust to doing strenuous activities in the high heat that we're experiencing today. And that can take up to 14 days. So there are various little personal protective equipment type things, like hard hat fans or cooling towels or sun visors and stuff, that workers can access to help take some of the edge off the exposure.

One of the things that I really talk about with our contractors is really pushing more for summer conditions to be included in the bid process. In Minnesota, we tend to think a lot about weather delays or winter conditions, heating work sites or heating specific tasks during the winter for both quality and productivity, and shifting that to actually think about supplying temporary cooling during the construction process.

Because we often think about those high heat exposures for the workers that are working outside during the day in the heat and exposure of the sun, but it can almost be worse for construction workers who are working on building out a facility that's closed up. We're not conditioning it at this point because we don't want to void the warranty on the equipment and can't really do much for airflow indoors besides just supply fans to move around hot, stale air.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, I didn't even think of that. Thanks for sharing that with us. We're always looking at people outside working, thinking, wow, I mean, it's so hot out. What are they doing? And then to think about inside, how stifling it must be. Do you think that these practices that you're talking about or asking people to implement, are these common practices across the industry?

STACY ARNOLD: I wouldn't say, no, that they're common. I know federally, there is an emphasis program on heat. But a lot of contractors really just stop at the minimum of water and shade. There's a lot of pressures to get jobs done from clients. And like I said, they tend to think and allow more for weather delays and stuff when you think about rain, or in our climate, snow. But it does tend to get forgotten when we get into these high temperatures and humidity.

NINA MOINI: What are some of the heat-related or condition-related perhaps injuries or things that you see most commonly happening?

STACY ARNOLD: There's a fair amount of just heat stress and heat exhaustion. I do know we did experience a fatality last year related to heat in the industry. Our industry does have a bit of a tendency to keep your eyes down, just push through, get it done. Heat exhaustion, heat stress is definitely something where it's important to be a friend, be looking out for the guy or gal working next to you to make sure that everybody's taking care of themselves and doing what they need to do.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, you mentioned some of the federal regulations. Are there any here in Minnesota? Is there a standard? I always wonder, can't they just call it off for the day? But like you mentioned, they're probably on a strict timeline.

STACY ARNOLD: There is not currently a standard. I know there is conversations about possibly publishing one. But federally, there is trying to be one as well. And with Minnesota being a State Plan state, ultimately, they can adopt whatever federally gets pushed forward, or they can opt to go above and beyond that. I can't speak for certain as far as to what way that would go.

But I do know Minnesota OSHA does publish a lot of resources on their website as far as how to adapt and work in these conditions. They give acclimatization schedules and suggestions for that, having buddy programs. There's a NIOSH weather app that does allow for workers to-- like this afternoon, it's at a warning temperature. And then that jumps up to danger.

NINA MOINI: What are some of the challenges to implementing some of these best practices that you would suggest?

STACY ARNOLD: Yeah, absolutely, cost does become a factor because if you're delaying project schedules or even supplying temporary cooling, all that does need to get paid for by somebody. Individual worker health is a huge contributing factor to this as well because there's no one-and-done template that works for somebody to be able to acclimatize to working outdoors in these conditions.

I mean, another thing that I know companies are doing and maybe find sometimes to be a little bit easier is they'll try and schedule the workday to start a little bit earlier so that maybe the super strenuous activities can hopefully be done before the heat of the day, or wrap up the day earlier. However, if it's anything that's requiring work outdoors, a lot of communities have noise ordinances that don't allow work to start before 7:00 AM or something, when the day might be actually a little bit cooler.

NINA MOINI: Hmm. Yeah, that's a good point. There are different rules depending on where you are. So I see here that you've worked in this industry for about 18 years. That's a long time. And I wonder if over that time of almost two decades, if you feel like the understanding around health and safety issues has changed over that time and the accommodations people are willing to make.

**STACY
ARNOLD:** I do think that there has been a huge shift. Especially post-COVID, there's a lot more emphasis on worker well-being, mental health, things like that. So I do think there is a shift in the industry, where those voices and conversations are definitely being had a lot more frequently with the workforce and those higher up on the ladder, and even clients getting involved that hire these companies, trying to understand what they can do from an owner's perspective to help support the workforce and the work being done in the field and the challenges that come with that.

NINA MOINI: All right, Stacy, thanks so much for going through this with us. I learned a lot. Really appreciate your time.

STACY Yes, thank you.

ARNOLD:

NINA MOINI: Stacy Arnold is Director of Safety of the Associated General Contractors of Minnesota.