

Looking for Wyoming's 'culture of safety'

By Matthew Manguso

A new report by former State Occupational Epidemiologist Dr. Timothy Ryan found Wyoming to have one of the worst work-related fatality rates in the nation. The report attributed it to poor communication, deficient data collection and a lack of a "culture of safety" in the state.

In his Dec. 19 report to Gov. Matt Mead, Ryan stressed the issue of worker safety in Wyoming, specifically in relation to the oil and gas fields, writing "safety occurs as an afterthought," and "greater than 85 percent of the fatality reports indicate that safety procedures were not followed."

According to Ryan's report, 369 employees lost their lives between 2001 and 2010. The rate of deaths peaked in 2007 with 48, but saw a dramatic decrease in 2009 with 19 cases of lost lives.

In those ten years, the state averaged one fatality every ten days. Five of those years, 2003-2005 and 2007-2008, the state achieved the grisly title of being the No. 1 state in the country with the highest rate of employee deaths.

In the year it took to complete the study, Ryan spoke to employees throughout the workforce asking their opinion on worker safety in the state. Ryan found there is a breakdown in communication between the upper management, supervisors and employees regarding safety. Safety training is not enforced on the worksite and employees are told to "get the job done" regardless of safety protocol or rules.

With the state's dependence on oil and gas production as a major source of employment and revenue, Ryan found the oil and gas industry accounted for 62 fatalities, or 20 percent of total occupational fatalities, between 2001 and 2008.

Of the fatalities experienced in oil and gas production 52 percent occurred on the drill rig, 40 percent arose while workers were driving either extremely fatigued or without a seat-belt and 8 percent were related to distribution and off-site repair.

"96 percent of fatalities occurred when safety procedures were not followed," Ryan wrote.

But Ryan's report was not merely a display of horrific figures, he also offered four recommendations that, he feels, could both diagnose and remedy the problem regardless of the industry.

"The following recommendations are based on the premise that the current levels of occupational fatalities in Wyoming are too high," Ryan wrote. "Further, the recommendations recognize that the current efforts by State and Federal agencies, as well as a variety of organizations, are fragmented. The current situation does not have a single solution; rather it requires a concerted effort on

all fronts."

Ryan recommended the organization and development of continuity in ongoing efforts, development of a data-monitoring system for the collection and analysis of occupational data, the promotion of Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) courtesy inspections and support efforts by industry to develop, monitor and enforce safety standards and practices.

"Sharing of information and coordination of efforts would facilitate the improvement of the current situation and open up opportunities to identify ways in which to streamline current State efforts," Ryan stated in his report.

In response to Ryan's report, Mead issued a statement supporting the suggestions.

"I believe that we must find ways to get workers in Wyoming home safely at the end of the day," Mead stated. "These recommendations are a first step on the path to making every workplace safer. They do not provide a solution but show that some systemic changes need to be made. They also indicate we still have work to do to further evaluate and make progress in workplace safety."

Mead went on to thank the Wyoming Oil and Gas Industry Safety Alliance for its continuing efforts to improve the "culture of safety," even though Ryan reported that said culture is the missing piece in Wyoming's workplace safety puzzle.

But the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) viewed Mead's response and Ryan's recommendations as a palliative measure. In a statement released by the AFL-CIO, the organization called for "sweeping legislative, agency, policy and cultural changes" for the benefit of everyone employed in the state.

"It's high time that state government and the Legislature quit playing games with the lives of workers in Wyoming," Wyoming State AFL-CIO Executive Secretary Kim Floyd said in the release. "Eight years of being worst or second-worst in death-on-the-job is proof that there's a problem in Wyoming that needs to be remedied."

In response to Ryan, the AFL-CIO offered its own suggestions including, empowering OSHA to hire more employees and conduct more scheduled and surprise inspections, direct OSHA to research why the Mine and Health Safety Industry have better safety records and how they achieve that level of safety, increasing penalties and fines for both employers and employees who fail to or discourage reporting injuries or incidences and, above all, make company injury records public.

"Data collection and analysis are fine, but preventing injuries and fatalities must be the primary focus of any meaningful change,"

Year	Number of Deaths	Number of Full Time Equivalents (FTE)	WY Occupational Fatality Rate/100,000 FTE (Rank)	United States Rate
2001	40	253,221.26	14.90 (2nd)	4.57
2002	33	250,096.04	12.00 (2nd)	4.30
2003	37	258,590.73	13.90 (1st)	4.24
2004	43	261,429.57	15.50 (1st)	4.33
2005	46	267,674.89	16.80 (1st)	4.22
2006	36	275,221.25	13.08 (2nd)	4.21
2007	48	277,379.53	17.10 (1st)	3.92
2008	33	281,930.50	12.40 (1st)	3.76
2009	19	265,986.11	7.14 (4th)	3.50
2010	34	272,081.42	12.50*	3.50

*Indicates a preliminary estimate.
*2011 is on course to have at least as many as 2010.

Courtesy image

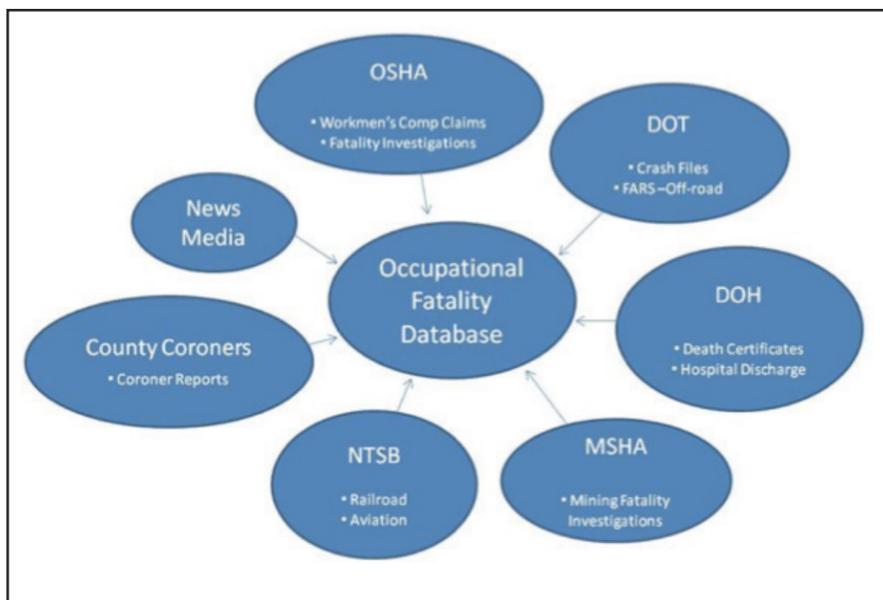
In the past 10 years Wyoming has been the state with the highest rate of work related fatalities in the country. The rate peaked in 2007 with 48 employees losing their lives.

Mark Aronowitz, lead attorney for the Spencer Association for Employee Rights, stated in the AFL-CIO release.

Though Ryan has moved on to employment in the private sector, his report and findings have brought attention to the issue of worker safety in the state. Whether or not

Ryan's or the AFL-CIO's recommendations are put into action, it's important to remember that 369 families were forever altered the day their loved one never returned home from work. ■

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Courtesy image

According to Ryan, the lack of communication has contributed to work related fatalities in Wyoming. His suggestion of creating a centralized database would help quickly determine where and when a fatality occurs.

Animal Adoption

Daisy
This is Daisy, an 18-month-old female Shepherd mix. Daisy was surrendered by her owner and now needs a new home and owner to call her own. She has been spayed, is current on all of her shots and is house trained. She is good with children as well as adults, but she has a very high energy level and would probably do well in a home with a fenced-in yard to play off some of the energy.

CoCo
Once again we are featuring CoCo, a 6-month-old Pit mix. He has been at the shelter for a few weeks now and really, really needs a good home to call his own. He has been neutered and is current on all of his vaccinations. He is a very intelligent animal, house trained and is good with people and other animals. As with all puppies, he has a lot of energy, needs some training and would do well in a household with a fenced-in yard.

Both of these animals can be adopted from the Animal Clinic of Pinedale.

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