

Officials Launch New Program on Cannabis Workplace Hazards

OSHA Launches New Program to Address Workplace Hazards in Colorado's Cannabis Industry

DENVER, CO – In response to mounting safety concerns within Colorado's cannabis industry, federal officials from the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) announced a new program on Tuesday designed to identify and mitigate workplace hazards at state-licensed marijuana facilities. This initiative, known as the **Local Emphasis Program for Cannabis Industries**, marks an intensified federal effort to reduce occupational injuries, illnesses, and fatalities in a rapidly growing sector that operates under complex regulatory frameworks.

With three workplace fatalities reported over the past seven years in Colorado's cannabis sector, the program underscores OSHA's commitment to improving safety conditions within a legal industry that continues to expand. While the incidents reported were "not necessarily related to the actual process of manufacturing the cannabis," according to Meredith Post, a compliance assistance specialist in OSHA's Denver office, they highlight the need for increased oversight to prevent further accidents.

Program Goals: Reducing Risks in the Cannabis Workplace

The Local Emphasis Program is designed to systematically identify hazards in cannabis cultivation, manufacturing, and retail facilities, prioritizing inspections of workplaces within Colorado's legal marijuana industry. OSHA officials emphasized that the program will focus on areas with frequent workplace risks, including respiratory protection, proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE), electrical safety, chemical handling, and slip-and-fall prevention.

Colorado Cannabis Industry: A Snapshot of Workplace Safety Challenges

Since the legalization of recreational marijuana in Colorado in 2014, the state has seen a rapid increase in cannabis-related businesses, creating new jobs and contributing significant tax revenue. However, with this expansion has come a set of unique challenges for workplace safety in a sector dealing with cultivation chemicals, flammable substances, and specialized machinery.

OSHA's compliance officers have conducted nearly four dozen inspections of cannabis facilities across Colorado since legalization, uncovering a range of hazards. These inspections revealed some of the primary risks in the industry, including:

Respiratory Protection Issues – Lack of adequate respiratory equipment for workers exposed to airborne contaminants, particularly during processing stages.

Insufficient PPE – Inadequate protective gear for employees handling chemicals and machinery, increasing the risk of physical and chemical injury.

Electrical Hazards – Outdated or improperly installed electrical systems, which pose fire and shock hazards.

Chemical Handling Risks – Improper storage and use of flammable liquids, such as solvents used in extraction processes.

Slip-and-Fall Dangers – Poor floor maintenance and cluttered work areas, leading to trip and fall risks.

OSHA's focus on these hazards reflects a growing recognition that safety standards in the cannabis industry must evolve in line with its growth. Post highlighted that many of the risks found are preventable with proper training, equipment, and workplace policies.

Cannabis Industry Challenges: Balancing Rapid Growth with Safety Protocols

Colorado's cannabis industry faces the unique challenge of operating in an evolving regulatory landscape where state legalization of marijuana clashes with federal prohibition. As a result, there is often uncertainty about federal agencies' role in enforcing standards, especially in areas like workplace safety.

While OSHA's involvement in state-legal cannabis facilities has increased, federal support has traditionally been limited due to the substance's federal classification as a Schedule I drug. However, as workplace incidents accumulate, OSHA is taking a more active role, emphasizing that safety protocols apply universally, regardless of a business's federal legality status.

"The industry is navigating rapid growth," Post noted, "and with that comes a need for stronger safety compliance measures to protect workers." She added that OSHA's program is intended to support cannabis employers in creating safer work environments by providing guidance on regulatory standards.

Safety Inspections and Employer Responsibility

Through the Local Emphasis Program, OSHA plans to conduct targeted inspections at cannabis businesses, working directly with employers to identify hazards and implement corrective actions. The program will prioritize high-risk areas, including chemical storage rooms, extraction laboratories, and cultivation spaces where workers may be exposed to potential respiratory hazards from pesticide application or volatile organic compounds (VOCs) during extraction.

Post stressed that one of OSHA's goals is to help employers understand their obligations under the Occupational Safety and Health Act, encouraging proactive measures rather than punitive enforcement. "Our inspections aim to support businesses in establishing long-term safety practices. Preventative measures are key to reducing incidents," she said.

Employers are expected to follow OSHA's general industry standards, which apply to cannabis facilities just as they do to other industrial workplaces. These standards include mandatory risk assessments, PPE provisions, clear labeling of hazardous materials, and emergency preparedness plans.

Common Hazards and Key Safety Measures for Cannabis Facilities

Cannabis businesses encounter a distinct set of occupational hazards due to the nature of cultivation, processing, and retail operations. OSHA officials have identified several best practices to help mitigate these risks, including:

Providing Respiratory Protection – Workers involved in extraction or handling chemicals should have access to respirators and air filtration systems to prevent exposure to harmful vapors.

Ensuring Proper PPE Use – Employees must be equipped with gloves, safety goggles, and clothing to protect against chemical burns or physical injury.

Implementing Electrical Safety Standards – Electrical panels, wiring, and outlets should be regularly inspected to prevent shocks or fire hazards.

Safe Chemical Storage – Flammable liquids and chemicals used in the extraction process should be stored away from heat sources in marked, secure containers.

Slip Prevention – Floors should be cleaned and inspected regularly, with clear pathways and proper signage to prevent slip-and-fall accidents.

In addition to these specific measures, OSHA recommends that cannabis employers establish a comprehensive safety program that includes regular training, maintenance schedules, and documented safety protocols.

Impact of the Local Emphasis Program on Colorado’s Cannabis Industry

As the Local Emphasis Program rolls out, OSHA expects Colorado’s cannabis industry to see improvements in workplace safety and a reduction in preventable incidents. By raising awareness of common hazards and offering support to cannabis businesses, OSHA aims to establish a baseline of safety practices that other states can adopt as they expand into legalized marijuana.

Colorado’s cannabis industry, in turn, stands to benefit from the program’s focus on safety, which can enhance worker retention, reduce liability, and improve operational efficiency. As compliance officers conduct inspections and provide feedback, OSHA’s hope is that the cannabis sector will adopt these guidelines to create a safer and more standardized working environment.

Looking Ahead: Building a Safer Cannabis Workplace

OSHA’s Local Emphasis Program for Cannabis Industries represents a proactive approach to addressing workplace safety in a field that is both emerging and highly regulated. By fostering collaboration between regulatory bodies and cannabis businesses, OSHA is setting the stage for a safer industry that prioritizes worker well-being.

“This program is a necessary step in keeping cannabis workplaces safe as the industry continues to grow,” Post concluded. “Our ultimate aim is to make sure that employees can work without fear of injury or exposure to hazards.”

As OSHA’s program gains momentum, it is likely that Colorado’s cannabis industry will serve as a model for other states navigating the complexities of workplace safety in legal marijuana. Through education, inspections, and compliance support, OSHA’s initiative represents a meaningful effort to ensure that safety standards keep pace with industry expansion.

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