

# Heat Rising, Risks Growing: Challenges for Cannabis Workers

## Heat Rising, Risks Growing: Challenges for Cannabis Workers Across the U.S.

As scorching temperatures sweep across much of the United States, the cannabis industry—already labor-intensive and heavily reliant on manual, outdoor, and greenhouse work—is facing mounting pressure to address the health and safety risks posed by extreme summer heat. With the eastern half of the country gripped by a historic heatwave, cannabis employers must confront not only the welfare of their workforce but also the broader infrastructure challenges that come with higher energy demand and utility strain.

### Heatwaves Bring Urgency to Worker Safety in Cannabis Cultivation and Manufacturing

For cannabis growers, trimmers, packers, and greenhouse workers, summer is not only the peak cultivation season—it's also the season with the highest risk of heat-related illnesses. Cannabis is often grown in hot, humid environments, and in many facilities, especially smaller or less-resourced ones, air conditioning and climate control are limited or non-existent.

Industry experts emphasize that this isn't merely a matter of discomfort. According to OSHA, heat exposure is the leading weather-related cause of death in U.S. workplaces. The symptoms of heat stress—heavy sweating, dizziness, fatigue, irritability, and confusion—can quickly escalate into life-threatening heatstroke if not addressed early.

### Recognizing Heat Stress Early: A Vital First Step for Cannabis Employers

Dave Blanchard, editor-in-chief of *EHS Today*, says cannabis employers should take a proactive approach to protecting their teams. Unlike traditional manufacturing environments, cannabis operations are often hybrid indoor-outdoor spaces—greenhouses, hoop houses, drying barns—where temperatures can exceed outdoor highs and heat regulation is difficult.

Blanchard emphasizes the need for basic precautions and worker training:

- Encourage hydration by allowing water bottles at workstations.
- Implement frequent, flexible break schedules, especially during the hottest hours.
- Invest in ventilation fans or shade structures in greenhouses and outdoor sites.
- Train staff to recognize signs of heat stress in themselves and coworkers.
- Use a buddy system to check in regularly during shifts.

These simple practices, he notes, can prevent serious incidents without waiting for regulatory citations or government intervention.

## **Cannabis Workplaces Face a Dual Challenge: Heat and Energy Instability**

While employee health is the immediate concern, the cannabis industry also faces another critical challenge: energy grid strain during peak summer usage. As Jeff Postelwait, managing editor at *T&D World*, explains, heatwaves are increasingly pushing the electrical grid to its limits, prompting warnings and emergency measures from utilities and the Department of Energy.

Cannabis cultivation, particularly indoor and hybrid grows, is notoriously energy-intensive, requiring high-powered lighting, climate control systems, extraction equipment, and security infrastructure. With electric vehicle adoption, data center expansion, and new residential construction already straining grid capacity, the cannabis sector is part of a growing industrial class vulnerable to brownouts, outages, and sudden power restrictions.

## **Rising Energy Demand and Limited Infrastructure Pose Risks to Operations**

The pressure on America's electrical infrastructure is no longer a distant concern. According to Postelwait, grid operators across the Southeast and Midwest are already making emergency preparations. The Federal Power Act was invoked just this week, allowing Duke Energy Carolinas to push some plants to full capacity.

Data from Accenture projects 4% annual growth in electricity demand—the fastest rate since the early 2000s. This rate of growth, driven by digitization, urban expansion, and electrification, means new transmission lines, substations, and power plants will be needed at scale, all while the cannabis industry competes for the same electricity as the rest of the commercial sector.

For cannabis companies, this means reevaluating their energy resilience strategies, exploring options such as:

- Backup power systems or generators
- Energy storage through battery banks
- More efficient HVAC and LED lighting systems
- Flexible scheduling to shift energy loads to non-peak hours

## **Cannabis Laborers Are Among the Most Vulnerable to Heat-Related Illnesses**

Cannabis workers, particularly those involved in harvesting and post-harvest processing, are often part of marginalized labor communities—including seasonal workers, immigrants, and women—who may face additional barriers to speaking up about unsafe conditions. Many work in states with high cannabis production and extreme summer heat, such as California, Arizona, Oklahoma, and Florida.

Without union protections or clear industry-wide safety standards, many cannabis employees may lack the knowledge or power to request breaks, report symptoms, or insist on safer working conditions.

The informal culture still present in many cannabis startups can exacerbate these risks, with some businesses underestimating their OSHA responsibilities. Employers must now treat heat not just as a seasonal inconvenience but as a systemic occupational hazard requiring thoughtful preparation and continuous monitoring.

## **Industry Leaders Urge a New Safety Standard for Heat in Cannabis Workplaces**

With climate patterns growing more unpredictable and temperatures trending upward, the cannabis industry must treat extreme heat as a long-term operational risk. Just as pest control and mold prevention are standard in cultivation SOPs, so too should heat stress mitigation become standard protocol.

Incorporating real-time temperature monitoring, employee wellness checks, and adjustable shift scheduling could help build a more resilient labor force. Furthermore, partnerships with local utilities and emergency managers can prepare facilities for power interruptions and emergency response coordination.

## **A Hot Summer Ahead: Time to Act Before It's Too Late**

As the cannabis industry matures, labor safety must keep pace with growth and profit. Heatwaves, once viewed as passing nuisances, are now annual—and in many regions, monthly—phenomena. The employers who plan now, educate their teams, and upgrade their infrastructure will not only protect lives but avoid costly interruptions, fines, and legal liability.

In an industry where trust, sustainability, and wellness are core values, caring for workers in extreme conditions is not just smart, it's essential.

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