Oil Patch Deaths on the Rise

JAMES MacPHERSON,Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — North Dakota's workers' compensation agency is offering safety training to companies in the state's booming oil patch, an effort to decrease job-related deaths and injuries happening most often to employees with less than a year on the job, officials said.

According to North Dakota Workforce Safety and Insurance data, 29 workers were killed on the job in the fiscal year that ended in July. Thirteen of the fatalities occurred in oil patch-related occupations, and seven of those deaths were from vehicle crashes

"One injury or one death is one too many," said Ron Ness, president of the North Dakota Petroleum Council, which represents more than 400 companies working in the state's oil fields.

From 2007 to 2011, half of the claims filed from injured workers in all occupations statewide were from employees who had been on the job less than one year, the data show. In oil-related positions, the number of injured workers filing claims and who have less than a year on the job is about 80 percent, according to Ness and WSI data.

North Dakota's robust economy lead by its booming energy sector has spurred an increase in the number of employers, workers and claims, said Bryan Klipfel, director of Workforce Safety and Insurance, which provides coverage for businesses when employees are hurt or killed on the job.

Work-related deaths in all occupations have risen from nine in 2010 and 14 in 2011, data show.

Klipfel said North Dakota's work environment is "not necessarily" more dangerous at present than past years, but "when the number of employees and employers grow, you're going to have more exposure," he said.

"The positive thing is the workforce is growing but it's never a positive thing when workers are hurt," Klipfel said Wednesday.

Oil patch-related occupations often are more dangerous than other jobs, Klipfel said.

"It's not like a job sitting at an office building," he said. "You're working outside around heavy equipment and a lot of moving parts. There is a greater chance of injury."

Klipfel said the state's employers — including the oil industry — typically do a good

job keeping employees safe "but I think there always is room for improvement."

WSI's $148,000 grant is aimed largely at improving awareness and safe operations for new workers, Ness said. Veteran safety officers from oil companies will attend training seminars across the state and share that information with all employees at the job site, he said.

The number of employees covered by the state's worker's compensation agency has risen from about 340,000 in fiscal 2010 to nearly 370,000 in the last fiscal year, data show. The number of employers during that time jumped from 20,316 to 23,812.

Job-related traffic deaths accounted for 46 of the 102 workplace fatalities from 2006 to 2012, said Klipfel, the former state Highway Patrol commander. Deaths in oil-related occupations totaled 26 during that time, he said.

Data show that more than half of the fatal job-related crashes have happened in western North Dakota over the past several years.

The number of employees in oil-related jobs has nearly tripled since 2010 to about 65,000 workers, and the number of claims filed by injured workers has increased from 747 to 2,866. Claims paid to injured oil workershave jumped $3.6 million in 2010 to $14.2 million last fiscal year, the agency said.

Total claims paid by WSI for all occupations have risen from $109 million in 2010 to $130.5 million last fiscal year, Klipfel said.

WSI also provides training and other incentives to promote workplace safety for new employees in other industries such as transportation and construction, Klipfel said. Companies that participate in some safety programs can reduce premiums by up to 25 percent, the agency said.

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