

3 worker deaths at San Leandro company take center stage at California hearing

By [Lisa Fernandez](#) | Published September 1, 2025 5:52am PDT | [San Leandro](#) | [KTVU FOX 2](#) |

The Brief

- A San Leandro company took center stage at a California hearing after 3 workers have died there.
- State Assmb. Liz Ortega wants to create a law to hold employers more accountable for worker safety.
- A KTVU investigation revealed Alco Iron and Metal had the most number of worker deaths at a California metal scrap company.

SACRAMENTO, Calif. - The deaths of three workers at a San Leandro company in the span of eight years - first exposed by KTVU - took center stage at a California hearing, where state lawmakers questioned government workplace agency leaders and vowed to make changes to increase employee safety.

"In my own district, there is a scrap metal company called Alco Iron and Metal," Assemblywoman Liz Ortega (D-San Leandro) said. "Three workers have died there in the last [eight] years."

3 workers die in 8 years

3 workers killed at San Leandro company; Cal-OSHA has no power to shut down

Three workers in the last eight years have died at a family-owned San Leandro metal recycling business, and the company has been fined for more than 60 safety violations as far back as the 1990s – possibly the worst safety record of any similar company in the last 10 years in California, a review of state records show.

[A KTVU investigation in April](#) marked the deaths of Luis Guerrero this year, Ray Alfaro in 2022 and Alberto Anaya in 2017, all of whom were employees at Alco Iron and Metal. They were crushed by a forklift, crushed by a bundle of copper wire, and a collapsed screw conveyer.

The investigation found that the scrap metal company has been fined more than 60 times since the 1990s for various safety violations and has possibly the worst safety record of any similar company in California. Cal-OSHA fined the company nearly \$160,000 for those three deaths. But in each case, the fines issued were either significantly reduced or are still pending, years later.

After the KTVU story, [Cal-OSHA referred the most recent death to the Alameda County District Attorney's Office](#), but no charges have been filed as yet.

Holding companies accountable

"When is an employer going to be held criminally accountable for the deaths of employees in the workplace?" Ortega continued. "Is it after the first death? The second death? After the third death?"

Ortega pointed to a [July state audit](#) of the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health, or Cal-OSHA, the government agency vested with oversight of workplace safety, which found that just 1.7 percent of cases were referred for criminal prosecution.

"We need to come up with solutions," Ortega said, announcing that she planned to introduce a bill in the next session to do just that. "I want to see actual accountability. You have to enforce the health and safety of workers."

Ortega and other state lawmakers spoke on Aug. 27 at the [joint Legislative Audit, Assembly Labor and Employment and Senate Labor, Public Employment and Retirement committees](#).

Alco response

The company, which has five locations and first opened in 1953, had previously issued a written statement to KTVU, saying that Alco has "always been a safe and family-oriented place to work."

"Alco truly is a family, and all of us watch out and care for each other," the statement read. "Alco prides itself on a robust safety training program and a culture where all management and employees buy into its importance."

Regarding the death of the first worker, the company maintains that the machine that collapsed had a manufacturer's design flaw.

Scathing state audit of Cal-OSHA

But Alco wasn't the only target of the legislators' hearing.

In fact, they were there to address a scathing state audit of Cal-OSHA, which found, among other things, that the agency did not have sufficient reasons for closing some workplace complaints and accidents and often did not conduct on-site inspections, and when investigators did go on site, auditors found that the agency may have overlooked potential violations.

California State Auditor Grant Parks and a senior auditor, Nick Versaci, also found that Cal-OSHA fines were sometimes less than the violations may have warranted and that there was "no clear rationale" for reducing fines.

State Sen. Lola Smallwood-Cuevas (D-Los Angeles) showed her concern that Cal-OSHA fines are lower than the national average and a state like North Carolina issues higher fines.

What is the point of having the strongest labor laws in the country, she and others asked, if there aren't any "legs to its stool."

And the auditors found that many of Cal-OSHA's policies haven't been revised for years – one such policy hasn't been revised for 17 years, and that often investigations

are done on paper, making streamlining cases and even reading the handwriting extremely challenging.

"Some cases get accidentally destroyed," Park said. In other cases, he noted, there are "illegible case notes."

On top of all that, Cal-OSHA is sorely understaffed, which is a "root cause" for many of the problems documented.

The agency had 32% of its positions unfilled last year, but vacancies were more severe in enforcement, where critical industrial hygienist positions were 81% unfilled.

Ortega noted that the audit, which she had ordered, proved that Cal-OSHA's deficiencies "go beyond staffing."

"Cal-OSHA is not working," she said. "We need reform."

Cal-OSHA responds to audit

At the hearing, Cal-OSHA Chief Debra Lee acknowledged the auditor's findings "which made it clear: improvements are needed."

She offered several changes already in the works, such as a new "aggressive hiring and recruitment strategy," updating policies, giving more trainings and working on overhauling the updated computer system.

"I agree it is high time Cal-OSHA use technology to be more efficient," Lee said.

Legislation ahead

In an interview, Ortega said she planned to introduce a bill next legislative session to address either the number of criminal prosecutions Cal-OSHA refers to district attorneys, like the agency did in the Alco situation, or mandate higher fines.

"Clearly there are structural changes that need to happen," she told KTVU. "It's obvious the [Cal-OSHA] directors have no idea. No one's really in charge over there in terms of deciding what gets referred to criminal prosecution vs. who gets a letter."

She said that the main problem she's trying to solve is that there needs to be "consequences for these bad employers."

"They're repeating the same dangerous work environments that are creating these issues," she said. "Right now, there are no consequences."

So on Labor Day, Ortega said, she wants to send a message to the widow of the man who most recently died at Alco is that "everyone should have the right in the state of California to go to work in the morning and come home to our family in the evening."

The Source

California legislative hearing, testimony and interview with Assm. Liz Ortega, testimony of Cal-OSHA, prior Alco statement, prior KTVU reporting.

San Leandro **California**

