

BUSINESS

## Agency protecting California's workers doesn't have enough people to do its job, audit says



Members of the Pilipino Workers Center in 2021 erected a memorial outside Los Angeles City Hall for workers who have died due to workplace hazards. (Al Seib/Los Angeles Times)



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July 18, 2025 6:51 PM PT

California's workplace safety agency doesn't have enough people to protect the state's workers, said a recent state audit.

A review from the California state auditor's office released Thursday said that the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health, known as Cal/OSHA, has displayed "critical weakness" in its ability to properly conduct inspections and address hazards.

The audit said understaffing was to blame for many of the agency's problems, with an overall vacancy rate of 32%, or 289 unfilled positions in the last fiscal year — with that rate much higher in certain district offices.

The overstretched agency has closed workplace complaints and accident reports without conducting an on-site inspection or sufficient explanation, the audit found. The audit was based on a review of 60 cases Cal/OSHA handled over a five-year period ending in 2024.

Problems with workers' safety has been in the news in recent weeks. A 19-year-old was killed when he [fell into a meat grinder](#) in a food processing facility in Vernon, [and workers were killed](#) at an explosion at a fireworks warehouse in Yolo County.

Cal/OSHA said in an emailed statement that it has made strides to improve staffing and fix operational problems.

Workplace safety experts said problems require major investment from the

governor's office.

“Chronic understaffing of Cal/OSHA has severely crippled its ability to protect the 19 million workers in California, and put them at risk and made them vulnerable to irresponsible employers,” said Garrett Brown, a former longtime Cal/OSHA inspector.

The audit said that when Cal/OSHA conducted inspections, documentation of cases was often lacking, leading analysts “to question whether it may have overlooked potential violations.” Investigators sometimes would not review an employer’s injury and illness prevention plan and would not take down detailed notes in their interviews with workers, according to the audit.

When the agency imposed fines, they were at times lower than violations called for, and in negotiations with employers after citations were issued, Cal/OSHA would further reduce fines without documenting clear rationale, the audit said.

The state audit echoes criticism from labor groups and lawmakers in recent years that Cal/OSHA has failed to adequately enforce workplace safety standards. It comes as the agency’s responsibilities have grown because of climate-change-induced extreme heat conditions endangering farmworkers, construction crews and others who toil in high temperatures.

Cal/OSHA spokesperson Denise Gomez said Friday that agency had begun working to improve its operations by adding enforcement offices in Fresno, Santa Barbara and Riverside counties and by creating an agricultural-focused unit to reach out to farmworkers across the state.

The agency plans to update its technology with a new electronic data management

system that will make it easier for the public to file complaints and improve internal documentation of workplace violations once it goes live.

And by expanding recruitment and streamlining hiring, Cal/OSHA has been able to reduce its overall staffing vacancy rate to 12% from over 30% two years ago, she said.

“These collective efforts reflect our deep commitment to continuous improvement and ensure that Cal/OSHA is better positioned than ever to protect the health and safety of California’s workers,” Gomez said.

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