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Is Cal/OSHA a Paper Tiger?

60% of its enforcement actions are letters to employers

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November 28, 2025

California has the reputation of having the most protective workplace health and safety regulations in the nation, says Garrett Brown, a former Cal/OSHA officer who tracks agency enforcement, funding and staffing levels. On paper, that is true compared to Federal OSHA and many states with their own OSHA programs, he says. But it's not backed up by audit findings.

“One of the most shocking revelations from the recent California State Audit of Cal/OSHA was how few worker complaints actually got investigated – only 17% of worker complaints in fiscal year 2023-24,” Brown says in his most recent Cal/OSHA update.

Cal/OSHA conducts on-site inspections less than half the time for all types of enforcement activity. Instead of site visits, Cal/OSHA sends a letter to employers so they can “self-inspect” and report their findings back to Cal/OSHA. These “letter investigations” account for 60% of Cal/OSHA enforcement actions.

In the most recent fiscal year studied (2023-2024), the California State Auditor reported that Cal/OSHA responded to 82% of validated worker complaints with a letter investigation and 17% of validated complaints had an on-site inspection.

This means that a worker filing a complaint that year had less than a one in five chance that it would result in an on-site inspection by Cal/OSHA.

For employer reports of serious injuries and fatalities in that year, 58% of employer reports were responded to with a letter investigation and 42% of employer accident reports were responded to with an on-site inspection.

Compliance office understaffing and budget cuts have compromised Cal/OSHA's ability to conduct more site inspections, says Brown. He says the latest data documented 95 vacant field inspector positions for a vacancy rate of 34% -- and there are only two industrial hygienists among the 192 filled CSHO positions.

“Enforcement inspections involving “health” issues – such as heat, wildfire smoke, airborne lead and silica exposures, noise, and ergonomics – are severely limited by lack of qualified personnel,” according to Brown.

As for funding, Cal/OSHA's enforcement budget for the current fiscal year 2025-26 was slashed by \$16 million, according to Brown.

“California's bragging rights are meaningless and are but a cruel joke for sick and injured workers,” says Brown.



Dave Johnson was chief editor of ISHN from 1980 until early 2020. He uses his decades of expertise to write on hot topics and current events in the world of safety. He also writes and edits at Dave Johnson's Writing Shop LLC and is editor-at-large for ISHN. Find him at <https://www.facebook.com/Dave-Johnsons-Writing-Shop-101316571547263/>, and on LinkedIn at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/davejohnsoneditor/>.