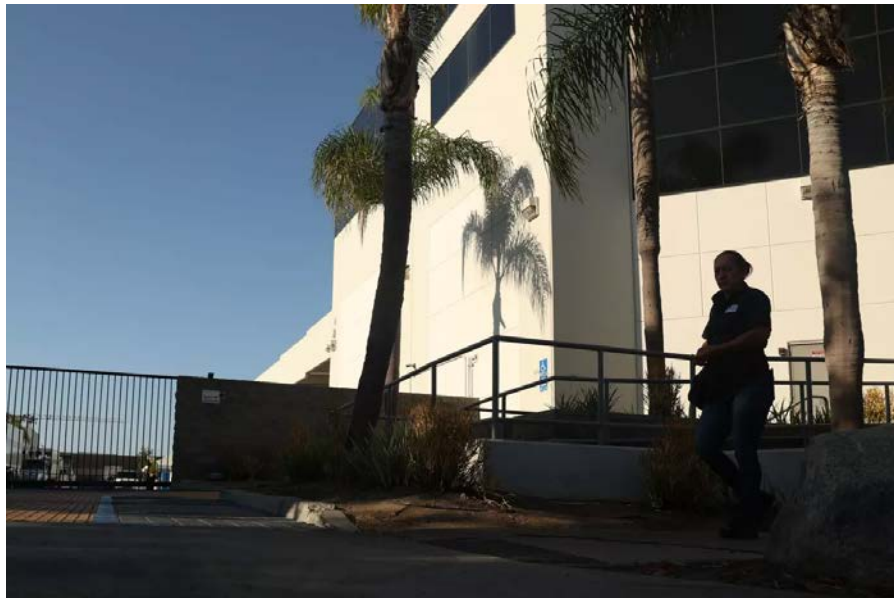


CALIFORNIA

Why workers still swelter, weeks after new heat standards took effect for indoor worksites



California's new indoor heat standards are expected to apply to 1.4 million workers at a broad range of job sites, including industrial warehouses, commercial laundries and restaurant kitchens. (Michael Blackshire / Los Angeles Times)

By Rebecca Plevin and Suhauna Hussain

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Alexia Rangel recalled sweating as she rang up customer orders at a Taco Bell in Alhambra during an early [August heat wave](#). The air conditioning wasn't working, she and fellow workers said, and heat radiated from the grills in the kitchen.

She remembers feeling dizzy a few hours into her shift, then her vision shifting to black and white. The color drained from her face, she said, and her lips turned purple.

“I nearly, almost passed out,” recounted Rangel, 20.

Despite new state regulations requiring workplaces to cool indoor climates when they reach unsafe levels, the temperature in the restaurant's kitchen that day registered 104 degrees, according to a hand-held thermometer that Rangel said a co-worker showed her. Workers would include a photo of the temperature reading in a complaint filed with state regulators.

After years of delays, California's [new rule regulating heat](#) in indoor workplaces took effect in late July.

The rule, adopted by the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health, lays out heat illness prevention measures for indoor workplaces. It

requires employers to provide easy access to clean drinking water and cooling areas, and to monitor workers for signs of heat illness whenever work site temperatures reach or exceed 82 degrees.

If temperatures climb to 87 degrees, or employees are required to work near hot equipment, employers must cool the work site or rotate workers out of hot environments. Workers are to be allowed an unlimited number of cool-down breaks to protect themselves from overheating.



Under California's new indoor heat standards, employers are required to provide easy access to clean drinking water and cooling areas. (Jason Armond / Los Angeles Times)

But more than four weeks after the regulations took effect, interviews with workers and union leaders indicate compliance varies by industry and workplace. Some workers interviewed by The Times said they continue to swelter. Many weren't aware of

the new rules.

The places where heat safety measures were in effect tended to be union shops where regulations had been written into existing contracts, or in industries such as demolition and hazardous materials removal where such precautions have become ingrained in workplace culture.

While employers have a legal responsibility to implement the new measures, advocates stressed that labor groups and community organizations will need to work with the state to raise awareness of the regulations and ensure employees have the information they need to push for changes. A major challenge will be supporting workers [who fear retaliation](#), labor experts said.

“The timeline should be as soon as possible, because heat was killing workers yesterday,” said Renee Guerrero Deleon, an organizer at the [Southern California Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health](#).

Some occupational health experts worry that Cal/OSHA won't be up to the task of promoting and enforcing the new standards. The agency is confronting a severe staffing shortage that is hampering its ability to conduct workplace

inspections. Cal/OSHA is already under fire for failing to aggressively enforce [heat regulations for outdoor laborers](#), raising questions about its ability to ensure compliance with [nearly 200,000](#) indoor sites.

Cal/OSHA spokesperson Peter Melton said in an emailed statement that the agency has begun “extensive campaigns on social media.” It will continue to ramp up inspections and work to increase hiring, Melton said.

The state estimates the heat standards will apply to about 1.4 million workers. The job sites expected to be most affected include industrial warehouses, commercial laundries, manufacturing facilities and restaurant kitchens.

Employers who fail to comply could face Cal/OSHA inspections and penalties [of up to \\$15,873](#) per violation; penalties rise for deliberate or repeat violations.

At the Taco Bell in Alhambra where Rangel works, employees initially weren't aware of the heat standards. Still, they were so concerned about conditions that, days after Rangel nearly fainted, workers held a one-day strike in front of the restaurant. They learned of the new rules while filing

a complaint with Cal/OSHA.

Taco Bell Corp. did not respond to specific questions about its compliance with the heat law, but issued a more general statement saying it prioritizes the health and safety of employees. “In this case, the franchise owner and operator of this location took swift action to address the issue,” the company said.

Rangel said the restaurant, indeed, has felt cooler in recent days, adding: “It took for someone to almost pass out for them to do all this stuff, like fix the A/Cs.”

Ana Solis is a dishwasher with Flying Food Group, a catering company that services airlines. She says the heat emanating from dishwashing machines can be suffocating. (Michael Blackshire / Los Angeles Times)

Ana Solis, 65, is among the workers who said they hadn’t heard about the new regulations until interviewed by The Times.

Solis is a dishwasher with [Flying Food Group](#), a catering company that services airlines. Her work area in Inglewood has air conditioning, but she said that the system isn’t powerful enough to cool a room filled with steamy dishwashing machines.

She said the high heat sometimes leaves her struggling to breathe and with red, irritated skin that she treats at home with creams. Solis said workers at the site are allowed to go to an air-conditioned cafeteria for 10-minute breaks and lunch, but that she sometimes needs additional breaks, escaping to a cool hallway to catch her breath.

“We don’t have the right to a cool-down break,” she said, unaware the new regulations provide that right. “But sometimes I take it, because the heat makes me feel like I’m suffocating.”

Flying Food representatives did not respond to questions from The Times regarding how the company is complying with the heat standards.

Margot Alvarez, an employee with Braun Linen, a commercial laundry company, was among the workers The Times interviewed who said they were unaware of the state’s new indoor heat regulations. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

Margot Alvarez, who sorts soiled bedding and other materials from convalescent homes and medical facilities at Braun Linen, a commercial laundry in Paramount, was also unaware of the regulations.

Hot steam wafts from a large washing machine as she works in a vinyl gown and gloves. She said the heat generated by sanitizing appliances makes the room feel at least 10 degrees hotter than the outdoor temperature.

After Alvarez raised concerns, she said, management installed a fan by her work station. But she said the fan mainly blows hot air in her direction. Twice in recent weeks, Alvarez said, she grew lightheaded and vomited in the restroom.

Scott Cornwell, owner of [Braun Linen](#), declined to comment on specific concerns Alvarez raised. He said his company works closely with the union that represents its workers, and has installed fans and air conditioning. He said workers have access to cooling areas and water.

“We are in compliance,” Cornwell said.

Bertha Servin, 58, works at [Mission Linen Supply](#) in Chino, an industrial laundry where workers sanitize and iron linens, uniforms and bedding for nearby

hospitals.

“The big industrial machines, the big dryers, the ironers, everything is hot,” Servin said.

But because of long-standing provisions built into their union contract, Servin said, she and her colleagues have access to fans and cooling machines, and workers come together to make requests, such as asking the company to repair a broken ice maker. The contract also requires the company to provide annual training sessions, where workers are told to be attentive to their bodies in the heat and to feel free to go to the lunch room for a cool-down break.

“If you don’t feel good, you have to report immediately to a supervisor,” she said.

CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

California cuts back on safety enforcement as farmworkers toil in extreme heat

Aug. 15, 2024

For demolition and construction workers laboring on sizzling roofs or handling hazardous materials in humid plastic enclosures, heat has long been a serious threat. Several workers who specialize in asbestos, lead and mold removal said efforts to safeguard against heat illness predate the state

standards. Instead, the industry serves as an example of what protocols can look like once they are ingrained in workplace culture.

Often, buildings undergoing construction have the power shut off, which means there is no air conditioning. On some sites, workers wear respirators and protective body suits as they extract hazardous materials. They often are slinging sledgehammers and crowbars “in a sauna-like environment,” said Fabian Plascencia, of the [Northern District Council of Laborers Local 67](#).

Each morning, [PARC Environmental](#), a hazardous services company based in Fresno, convenes a meeting to discuss the dangers presented by that day’s job site, and review a worksheet that outlines safety protocols, including heat illness prevention, said foreman Rodolfo Nunes.

“The company has always been really strict on heat, since we are from the Central Valley. Our guys need to stay hydrated at all times,” said Nunes, 35.

For demolition and construction workers laboring on sizzling roofs or handling hazardous materials in humid plastic enclosures, heat has long been a serious threat. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

Nunes frequently works in triple-digit conditions.

“Oh man, it gets overwhelming,” he said, adding that he’s finally developed a habit of drinking water before he’s thirsty.

“It’s adapting, just getting used to routines,” Nunes said. “When you’re new, you don’t know the first symptoms, like dry mouth. The small things that are going to take you to dehydration.”

[Eco Bay](#), a Bay Area company that does hazardous materials remediation, convened supervisors for a meeting earlier this summer to discuss the new indoor heat rule.

Workers had already been trained to hydrate and take breaks, and to check in with each other for symptoms of heat illness using a buddy system, said

Juan Carlos Moreno, 51, a supervisor at Eco Bay. The main changes communicated at the training involved monitoring temperatures throughout the job site and emphasizing to workers that there are no break limits in the heat.

Michelle Moreno, Eco Bay's safety director, said the company now places thermometers in different areas of the job site and checks them throughout the day to ensure the temperature is under the 82-degree threshold.

During a months-long project inside a poorly ventilated building in the Sacramento area last year, Eco Bay provided workers with respirators that had built-in cooling systems, called a "powered air-purifying respirator." Moreno said the company's owner was a laborer himself before he started the company, and so he takes safety seriously and is "more than willing to spend money on it."

"It comes down to companies having the right culture," Moreno said, "and making sure people in charge are trained properly to recognize hazards and how to put controls in place, and also training workers so that they know how to recognize warning signs and to speak up if they aren't feeling well."

This article is part of The Times' [equity reporting](#).

[initiative](#), funded by the [James Irvine Foundation](#), exploring the challenges facing low-income workers and the efforts being made to address California's economic divide.

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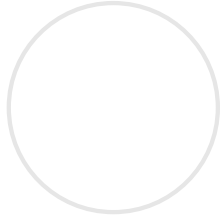
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