

Risk Insights

Provided by: MST Insurance Solutions, Inc.

Making the Connection Between Workplace Safety and Sustainability

As stakeholders, regulators and the public continue to hold organizations more accountable for their environmental, social and governance (ESG) practices, many employers are connecting sustainability and occupational safety. Specifically, employers who neglect to address the environmental impacts of their operations could leave their workers susceptible to lasting health complications.

In light of these concerns, employers simply can't afford to ignore sustainability in their occupational safety programs. This article provides more information on the health risks associated with poor environmental practices in the workplace and outlines key sustainability initiatives employers can leverage to better protect their staff on the job.

Environmental Exposures and Employee Health

Throughout the course of their operations, employers may emit excess greenhouse gas emissions and release a variety of hazardous waste (e.g., certain plastics, batteries, pesticides, paint, cleaning products, automotive fluids and old electronics), potentially polluting the air and water. Failing to manage these environmental concerns could result in workers being repeatedly exposed to harmful substances and toxins. Over time, this could lead to the following health issues:

- **Respiratory problems**—Some pollutants may irritate or inflame the lungs, causing coughing and shortness of breath. Continued exposure may contribute to asthma, bronchitis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and frequent respiratory infections (e.g., pneumonia).

- **Neurological conditions**—Several studies have shown that different forms of pollution can impair brain function, ultimately heightening the risk of neurodevelopmental disorders, cognitive decline and mental health conditions.
- **Certain cancers**—Some of the dangerous substances and toxins emitted from hazardous waste have been linked to hormone disruption. This can elevate cancer risks, namely as it relates to lung, breast, bladder and liver cancer.
- **Cardiovascular diseases**—In addition to possibly worsening existing cardiovascular conditions (e.g., coronary artery disease and arrhythmia), pollution can increase the likelihood of developing certain risk factors for heart failure, such as high blood pressure, obesity, high cholesterol and diabetes.

Considering the health risks that may result from environmental exposures, it's imperative for employers to promote operational sustainability.



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Key Sustainability Initiatives

By regularly reviewing their ESG practices and adjusting them as needed to reflect current environmental developments and regulations, employers can keep stakeholders satisfied while cultivating a healthier workforce. Key sustainability initiatives for them to consider include:

- **Bolstering energy efficiency**—When possible, employers should make the switch to energy-efficient machinery, tools and technology. In office settings, this may involve the installation of LED lighting systems, occupancy sensors, smart thermostats and advanced power strips that can detect when plugged-in devices are no longer in use and cut off power to this technology. In production spaces, this could entail the use of automated equipment controllers and high-efficiency pumps and motors.
- **Reducing pollution**—Employers should also leverage water and air filtration systems that limit both indoor and outdoor pollution. Sustainable filtration systems may rely on filters made from natural or renewable materials and utilize ultraviolet, water vortex or plant-based filtration and purification processes to remove toxins effectively.
- **Removing hazardous waste**—If their operations involve the release of hazardous waste, employers must have adequate waste management protocols that allow for safe removal. Proper protocols may include storing this waste in sturdy, leak-proof containers that can be securely closed; clearly labeling such containers to indicate what's inside and the date the waste was initially compiled; ensuring waste is segregated based on compatibility (e.g., separating oxidizers from flammables); and safely disposing of such waste at approved facilities.
- **Using sustainable personal protective equipment (PPE)**—In many cases, it may be possible for employers to purchase PPE made from eco-friendly materials, such as gloves made from natural rubber, glasses with recycled frames, face masks made from biodegradable materials, work vests with recycled polyester and hard hats formed by plant-based plastics.
- **Neutralizing emissions**—There are a range of solutions that employers can adopt to help offset the greenhouse gases emitted by their operations and improve their overall carbon footprint. This could involve streamlining production processes to reduce waste; optimizing transportation and delivery methods to save fuel; investing in solar, wind and other renewable energy sources; working with suppliers that prioritize sustainable

sourcing practices; and participating in projects that help remove emissions from the environment (e.g., reforestation and carbon capture technology).

Conclusion

As workplace safety and sustainability become increasingly interconnected, employers must recognize that preserving the environment plays an integral role in protecting their employees. Ignoring environmental hazards in the workplace can have serious safety consequences, potentially leaving staff with long-term health conditions. Through the successful implementation of proactive initiatives, employers can meet their ESG expectations while keeping staff happy and healthy.

Contact us today for more occupational safety resources and risk management guidance.