

# Oregon construction deaths increase in 2007

**O**n a warm July afternoon last year, a falling 8-foot jackhammer attachment struck 43-year-old Jeffrey Helgeson on a downtown Portland street. He was rushed to the hospital with head injuries and died a short time later. He had been part of a three-man crew working to break up a section of street. He left behind a wife, two grown children, and grandchildren.

Helgeson was one of 35 people covered by Oregon's workers' compensation system who died on the job during 2007, according to data compiled by the Department of Consumer and Business Services (DCBS). Oregon's construction industry had the most fatalities of any industry, with 12 deaths reported. Twenty-nine percent of the deadly accidents in 2007 were the result of falls, and fall protection continues to be the No. 1 Oregon OSHA citation.

"I never forget a single one," said Mike Riffe, Oregon OSHA's Portland-based accident investigator, who worked on the case involving Helgeson.

According to Riffe, the common thread he sees in his work is inattention. His investigation found the piece of equipment that killed Helgeson was attached to the track hoe with a quick coupler device that was not being properly used, inspected, or maintained.

Just before the event, Helgeson's co-workers investigated unusual noises from the hammer. Sadly, they were inadequately trained to recognize the hazards associated with the equipment before Helgeson was struck.

"It was absolutely, totally preventable," Riffe said. "Helgeson was told to stand there and hold a piece of plywood to shield pedestrians and vehicles from debris ejected from the hammering operation. He was the victim and didn't have anything to do with it."

The construction company was cited and ultimately fined \$5,000 for the violation.

"Construction continues to be very dangerous," said Michael Wood, Oregon OSHA administrator. "We need to reduce those risks, particularly those that lead to falls, because we know how to prevent them."

2007 was the first time in a decade Oregon's construction industry was the deadliest. Wood said he can't point to a specific reason for the increase and it remains to be seen whether this trend will continue.

"I think the thing that's killing people is the fact that serious violations continue in the workplace," Wood said.

The agriculture, forestry, and fishing sectors saw the second-highest numbers for on-the-job fatalities, with five deaths reported.

The 2007 total still marks the third-lowest number of compensable workplace deaths in the state's history. In 2005, there were 31 deaths, the lowest number reported since the state started tracking workplace deaths in 1943.

There was an average of 55 workplace deaths per year in Oregon in the 1990s and 81 per year in the 1980s.

DCBS compiles fatality statistics from records of death claim benefits paid by Oregon workers' compensation insurers

during the calendar year. The data reported may exclude workplace fatalities involving self-employed individuals, federal employees, workers who are covered by other compensation systems, and incidents occurring in Oregon to individuals with out-of-state employers.

Riffe investigates an average of seven deaths a year and said no matter the industry, employers must be aware of job hazards.

"Many companies are focused too much on production, and must to stay competitive in today's changing marketplace, but inattention to detail can lead to tragedy," he said.



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**— Mike Riffe**

# Administrator's Message



## Dangerous reliance on "common sense"

“Common sense is what tells us the world is flat,” warned a sign on my former boss’s wall. Indeed it is. “Common sense” can be important in evaluating potential solutions – but it is frequently just another way to describe beliefs held so strongly they defy empirical proof, or disproof. And it is often used by those evaluating health and safety as a way to sidestep tough questions or to avoid looking at root causes.

Some recognized more than a thousand years before Copernicus that the earth rotates around the sun – the theory is found in the work of some Greek philosophers and even in Vedic Sanskrit texts of India in the eighth and ninth centuries B.C. But when Copernicus, and later Galileo, sought to prove it, they were challenged and ridiculed – based on the “common sense” of the time.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle (whose extraordinary body of work was, for the most part, based on reflective thought, not experiment) taught the “common sense” notion that heavy objects fall faster than light objects. The first systematic research to correct his error did not take place until Galileo rolled balls of different weights down a slope. But in grade school (which I *did* attend *after* Galileo finished his work, thank you very much), my teacher asked us, “Which will fall faster – 100 pounds of feathers, or 100 pounds of steel?” with the answer “Neither – they both weigh 100 pounds.” All as though Galileo had not proven the weight to be irrelevant hundreds of years before. “Common sense” persists.

Even at the time of Columbus and Magellan, popular culture still rejected the notion that the world was round (for that matter, there are still a few very sincere believers in a “flat earth” in this country today). All based on “common sense.”

Are these more than answers to trivia questions? Does this matter to us as we pursue workplace health and safety? I’d

suggest that there are at least two reasons we need to confront common sense. First, some “common sense” beliefs get in the way of addressing workplace risks. Second, too many managers and safety practitioners rely upon “common sense” to protect workers – and on the lack of common sense to explain failures in their programs.

“Common sense” tells some a gas they can’t smell won’t hurt them. And that can be deadly.

“Common sense” tells others a strong person can regularly lift extreme weights without injury, not realizing that strength is primarily a factor of the muscles, and permanent damage from lifting generally arises in the joints (in other words, those at the greatest danger may be those “strong enough to hurt themselves”). Exercise and conditioning *do* reduce risks, but regularly pushing to the limits of strength increases them, particularly for those who miss the natural warning signs.

For many, it violates “common sense” that a smaller spray booth works better than a large one. For others, “common sense” suggests that workers most familiar with working at height are unlikely to experience a fall (in spite of the documented dangers of complacency).

The list of “common sense” truths that aren’t true at all can go on and on. And getting employers and workers to change those behaviors is one of the challenges that we at Oregon OSHA face every day.

I am also convinced that when a supervisor’s investigation concludes “he just didn’t show common sense,” it’s a cop-out. Relying upon “common sense” to protect employees works only if we all share the same background and perspectives. And that shared background is increasingly rare. If you’re relying on your co-worker’s “common sense,” you may not know it’s a mistake until it’s too late – for both of you.

## RESOURCE

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## **Oregon OSHA forms alliance with Oregon Home Builders Association**

As part of an effort to boost outreach to employers and employees in the construction industry, Oregon OSHA has formed a partnership with the Oregon Home Builders Association (OHBA). The ultimate goal of the alliance is to help reduce accidents and fatalities.

“This partnership will solidify our commitment to promoting safe solutions that benefit the industry,” said Mike Gansen, OHBA president and owner of Gansen Construction in Eugene. “My hope is that our membership will take advantage of the numerous health and safety education programs available.”

The alliance will also help the discussion about safety and health in the workplace. For instance, Oregon OSHA will work with the OHBA to develop materials for workshops, conferences, and safety programs. The OHBA will also help promote Oregon OSHA’s services, including the confidential consultation program and Safety and Health Achievement Recognition Program (SHARP).



## **Hermiston hospital awarded Oregon OSHA grant to promote safe patient handling**

Oregon OSHA has awarded a \$394,617 grant to Hermiston’s Good Shepherd Medical Center so the hospital can buy patient lifting equipment as part of a comprehensive strategy to protect patients and workers from the hazards associated with patient handling. The money comes from the Workers’ Benefit Fund, maintained by the Department of Consumer and Business Services.

On average, nurses lift a cumulative nine tons a week, which is the equivalent of 28 Double Decker buses per year. Sprains and strains among nurses and other health care workers comprise a significant portion of all workplace injuries, with more than 500 reported each year in Oregon. Oregon OSHA has been working with the Oregon Coalition for Healthcare Ergonomics to develop a pilot program for safe patient handling at Good Shepherd that can be applied to other rural hospitals in the state.

“This grant will make a big difference for us,” said Vicki Horneck, Good Shepherd interim vice-president of nursing. “We don’t have any ‘extra’ nurses here, so anything that reduces injuries to nurses and keeps our staffing levels constant is a direct benefit to our patients.”



## **First traditional logging company in nation awarded VPP status by Oregon OSHA**

Oregon OSHA has awarded “VPP Merit” status to Weyerhaeuser’s Coos Bay Timberlands operation. The Voluntary Protection Program (VPP) is a workplace safety and health management program that encourages employers to meet rigorous workplace safety standards that go beyond regulatory compliance to protect workers and reduce injuries. Currently, 15 Oregon worksites participate in VPP, including two other Weyerhaeuser locations.

Weyerhaeuser’s Coos Bay Timberlands employs 32 workers and more than 200 contractors. The project includes logging, road engineering, and sustainable forestry, designed with a 40- to 60-year harvest cycle. Although it’s the third tree farm in VPP, the Weyerhaeuser site is the first full-scale logging operation to receive VPP status in the nation.



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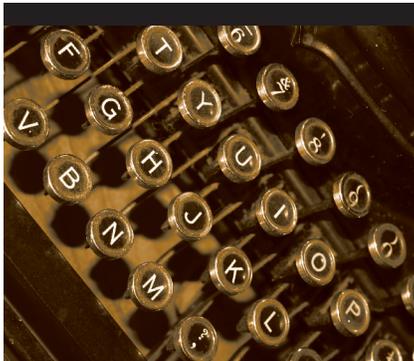
## Scam alert

Oregon employers should be wary of anyone trying to sell them an “updated” OSHA poster. The posters have always been free and available for pick-up at any OSHA office or online at [www.oroша.org](http://www.oroша.org), under the “Most requested items” section.

In one case, a Florida company was charging \$84.99 for a one-year subscription to its services, which consisted of providing the so-called updated posters. Oregon OSHA did issue a new poster in September 2007 but it’s not illegal to have an old poster

displayed. The law does require employers to display the poster at a location where employees report each day or where they gather.

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