

OSHA - AN OVERVIEW

By James Wilson

Just over a decade ago Congress passed the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970. The new law gave the federal government the authority to set and enforce safety and health standards for most of the nation's workers, the first comprehensive national program of its kind. The agency which is the progeny of this law, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), has been a source of controversy. Nine years of statistical information now exists on work injuries and illnesses. This information can be used to review the experience with on-the-job accidents since the inception of the government's new safety program.

One of the purposes of the OSH Act of 1970 was "—encouraging the states to assume the fullest responsibility for the administration and enforcement of their occupational safety and health laws—". To accomplish this the act provided that shared funding would be available to states which developed an approved plan for a program. An acceptable program is one which is at least as effective as the federal OSH Act. Since then many states have adopted and administer safety programs of their own. In December 1972, Alaska submitted its plan which received approval. State legislation which basically mirrors the OSH Act of 1970 was passed and signed into law in April 1973. The duties and responsibilities of the Alaska Department of Labor's existing safety section were expanded to meet the scope of the new state program.

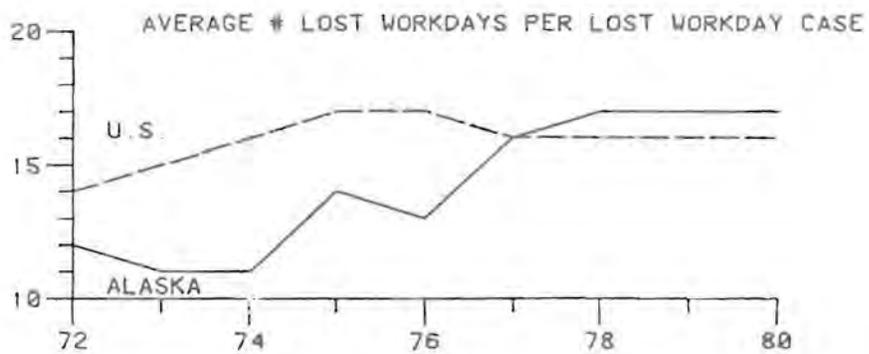
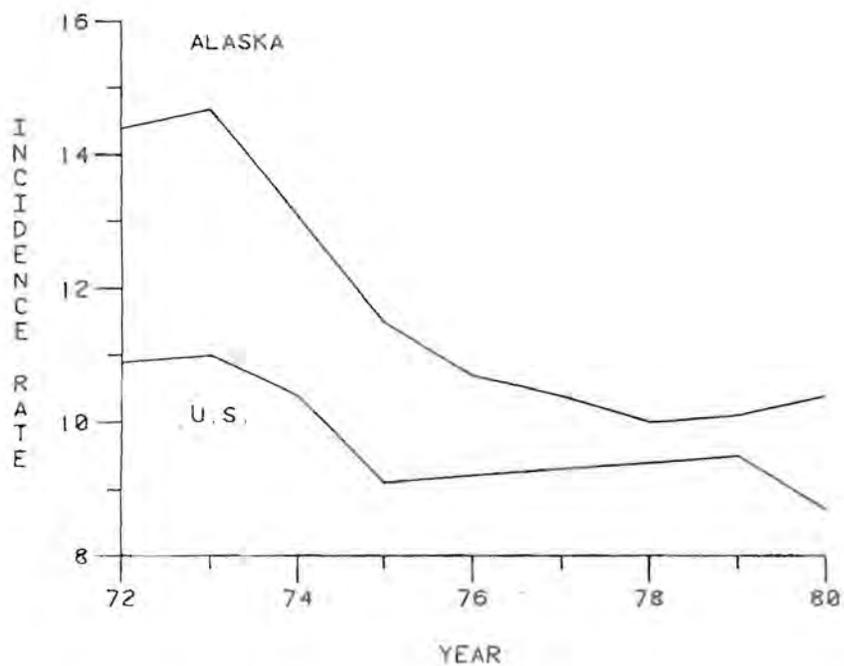
ACCIDENT RATES, U.S. AND ALASKA

The incidence rate for occupational injuries and illnesses in private industry has declined appreciably, both nationally and in Alaska, since 1972. The U.S. rate of 8.7 cases per 100 workers recorded in 1980 represents a total drop of 20.2 % from the rate of 10.9 in 1972. However, from 1976 to 1979 the national incidence rate showed a slight but steady increase each year. Only in 1980 was this trend broken when the lowest rate to date was recorded. Over the nine year period from 1972 to 1981, Alaska's private sector incidence rate fell from 14.4 to 10.4, a decrease of 27.8 %. Alaska's rate declined steadily from 1973 to 1978. Nearly identical rates were experienced in 1978 and 1979. In 1980 the state had a slight increase in the rate, the first in 8 years.

The occupational injury and illness incidence rate is the sum of 2 parts; the rate for cases resulting in lost workdays, and the rate for cases not involving lost workdays. Since time loss cases are generally more serious, the lost workday case rate constitutes a measure of the more severe injuries and illnesses. The total decline in the overall U.S. injury and illness rate from 1972 to 1980 is the result of a 38.2 % decrease in the rate for cases without lost worktime. Over the 9 year period the U.S. rate for lost time cases has slowly but steadily risen for a total increase of 21.2 %. The manufacturing industries experienced the greatest rate of increase in the lost workday case rate. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, accident rates generally can be expected to rise as industry employment levels increase. The only times the U.S. lost workday case rate showed declines were in 1975 and 1980 when higher risk industries experienced significant losses in employment levels.

In Alaska the overall decline in the incidence rate for the private sector has been greatly determined by the drop in the rate for cases not involving lost worktime. The injury and illness incidence rate for cases not involving lost time was 5.1 in 1980, a decline of 44 % from the 1972 rate of 9.1. Unlike the U.S., however, the lost time case rate has not increased. The Alaska private sector lost workday case rate for 1980 was 5.3 cases per 100 full-time workers, the same level as in 1972. From 1977 to 1979, the rate had held at its lowest recorded level of 5.0. Most of the rise in the lost time case rate for 1980 was due to a single unusual occurrence at a cannery where 122 lost workday

INCIDENCE RATE TRENDS, ALASKA & U.S.



cases resulted when workers became ill from contaminated drinking water. Between 1972 and 1980 employment in Alaska's private industries increased by 86 %. A fairly stable lost workday case rate during a period of growth could be viewed as an achievement. State of Alaska safety program officials say that holding down the rate of serious accidents is just as much an accomplishment as decreasing the overall injury and illness rate.

The average number of days lost from work due to a time-loss injury has changed since 1972. For the U.S. as a whole the average number of days lost has risen only slightly since 1972. An average of 14 days was recorded in 1972 compared to 16 days for the last 4 years. This fairly stable average has been maintained during a period in which the lost time accident rate has steadily risen. In Alaska, on the other hand, the rise in the average number of days lost has been somewhat greater. The state's private sector average increased from 12 days in 1972 to its current level of 17 days where it has held for the last 3 years.

The rise in Alaska's average number of days lost has occurred even though the lost workday injury rate has remained stable. The liberalization of Alaska's Workers' Compensation benefits in 1975 may have influenced the upward shift in the average number of days lost per case. It would seem questionable that the time loss accidents would have become more severe. Fortunately the average number of days lost seems to be stable now, both nationally and in Alaska.

PORTRAIT OF JOB ACCIDENTS

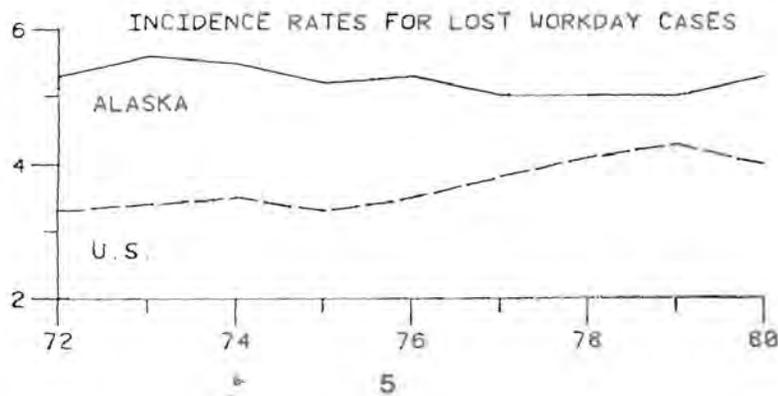
In addition to the incident rate data, there exists 4 years of time loss case information from Alaska's Workers' Compensation files to describe the characteristics of work injuries and illnesses. Following is a brief portrait of Alaska's job accidents.

Only 3 to 4% of all cases reported are occupational illnesses, the majority of these being skin conditions mostly in seafood processing. Less than one-half of all cases result in lost time past the day of injury. The average number of workdays lost per time loss case since 1978 is 17. Women account for less

than 20% of the reported time loss claims in Alaska while they account for approximately 45% of the work force. Manufacturing industries lead all others in the number of claims filed. Craftsmen, operatives, and laborers are the occupational groups experiencing the most injuries, with nearly two-thirds of the claims.

For all time loss cases the back is the most frequently injured part of the body, with sprains and strains the most common result. Overexertion now accounts for 25% of all time loss injuries. Working surfaces (usually floors or the ground) are the source of injury in 20% of time loss cases, which nearly always result from falls. August is the peak month for injuries. Accidents occur most frequently on Monday, while Friday is the most injury free day of the regular work week. Over one-fourth of all accidents involve workers under 25 years of age. This age group comprised 19% of the work force in the 1970 census. Over one-half of all injuries involve employees who have been on the job one year or less and roughly 40% of all injuries occur during an employee's first six months on the job. In construction and manufacturing at least 25% of all time loss injuries involve workers who are in their first month on the job.

Any examination of accident statistics for evaluating the success of a safety program must bear one point in mind; some accidents are not within the control of legislation or rules. Some accidents will occur regardless of occupational safety efforts. For example, over one-half of all work related deaths in



Alaska result from aircraft and motor vehicle accidents. These are not controllable by federal or state OSHA regulations. Also some common types of injuries such as many sprains and strains will not be prevented by safety regulations. Unfortunately, there is no data to discern what percentage of industrial accidents could not have been prevented by safety legislation or enforcement. One point is certain. For a safety program to succeed there must be a commitment by the employer. Management must be actively involved with safety issues and there should be a safety ethic which is promoted by the employer and shared by the workers.

Statistical data on the national work-related accident rate since the inception of OSHA shows mixed results. OSHA, however, is even now undergoing substantial changes. Recently, under the Carter administration's efforts to streamline government, OSHA was one of the first agencies to review its regulations and eliminate those it considered unnecessary. President Reagan's new assistant secretary for Occupational Safety and Health is instituting further change in the agency. He feels that there has been an adversarial relationship between OSHA and industry which he would like to change to one of cooperation in achieving the goal of improved safety. New measures of effectiveness are being developed by OSHA managers for each of its program areas and also for evaluating state administered programs. Incidence rate levels will be an integral part of the effectiveness criteria.

Statistical information on Occupational Injuries and Illnesses in Alaska is published annually in the following reports: *Occupational Injury and Illness Survey* and *Work Injuries and Illnesses*. Additional unpublished data is also available. For copies of publications or further information, contact James Wilson (phone 465-4520) at the Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis Section, P. O. Box 1149, Juneau, AK 99811.
