

# Alaska's Worker Injury and Illness Rates Improving

by James Wilson

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Alaska has one of the highest worker injury rates in the nation. The ratio of higher risk jobs in our work force make this a fact. The percentage of Alaskan workers in seafood processing, wood products, mining, and transportation is much greater than the national average. Although Alaska is among the states with high injury rates, there is some good news to be seen in the latest figures on Alaska's work injury and illness rates.

## Rates down in the goods producing industries

Alaska's mining industry is dominated by oil and gas extraction, which is composed of two parts: petroleum and gas production, and oil and gas field services. The "big oil" companies are the producers. Their subcontractors provide the field services such as drilling, exploration, and construction.

The production companies have an OSHA case rate consistently lower than most trade industries. The 1990 OSHA case rate for oil and gas production was 4.5 cases per 100 workers, less than half the all private industry average of 11.1. The time loss case rate for the producers, at 1.1 in 1990, is among the lowest of any industry. During the last ten years the field service companies have cut their OSHA case rate nearly in half, from 24.9 in 1981 to 13.9 in 1990. During this same period their time loss case rate has been cut by over half, from 11.7 to 5.4, and is now at a record low.

Construction's record low rates for all OSHA cases and time loss cases were set in 1988 during a period of declining employment. In 1989 both employment and the injury/illness rates rose. During 1990 construction employment grew 7%; but the OSHA case rate fell to its second lowest level of record, 14.7 cases per 100 workers. Although the time loss rates for 1989 and 1990 are above the 1988 low, it is encouraging that the average for the last three years, at 6.5, is below all years prior to 1988. Of all time loss cases in 1990, 9% were from

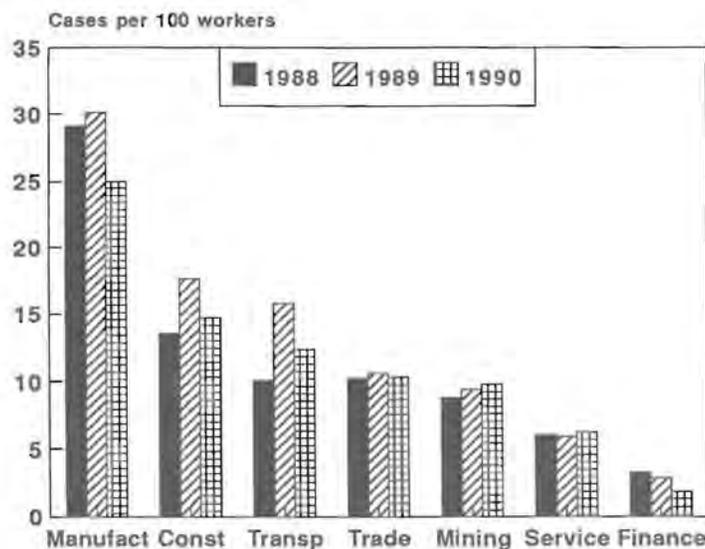
construction employees who account for 5% of all nonfederal workers.

Alaska's logging and seafood processing industries traditionally lead all others in the rate of OSHA recordable injuries and illnesses. The OSHA case rate in logging has shown continued improvement for the last four years. The 1990 rate of 40.1 cases per 100 workers is a marked change from the rate of 56.6 recorded in 1986. The time loss case rate for logging, at 21.9 per 100 workers in 1990, is the lowest in six years. The OSHA case rate in seafood processing has been fluctuating the last few years. The preliminary 1990 rate of 26.7 cases per 100 workers is the lowest recorded since 1984. Of more importance,

Figure • 1

OSHA Industry Case Rates  
Alaska 1988-1990

Source: Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis Section, Occupational Safety and Health Statistics.



the time loss case rate, 13.3, is the lowest in five years.

**Fatality rate highest in nation**

According to the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), Alaska has the highest worker fatality rate in the nation. Based on figures for the seven year period 1980 to 1986, Alaska has had a worker fatality rate of 34.2 cases per 100,000 workers. This is four times higher than the U.S. rate of 7.9.

More than 100 fatalities have been reported to the Alaska Division of Workers' Compensation during the last three years. Forty cases were reported for 1990. The leading cause of fatal injury for Alaskan workers is aircraft accidents. There were 9 such cases in both 1989 and 1990. The next leading cause of worker death in 1990 is falls, followed by motor vehicle accidents. For the first 10 months of 1991, there have been 34 reported fatalities.

The data collected by the Division of Workers' Compensation does not include commercial fishing. A 1988 study by the University of Alaska's Institute of Social and Economic Research, for the period 1981 to 1984, concluded that the death rate among commercial fisherman in Alaska was 20 times higher than the average for all other industries. Beginning in 1992, The Alaska Department of Labor

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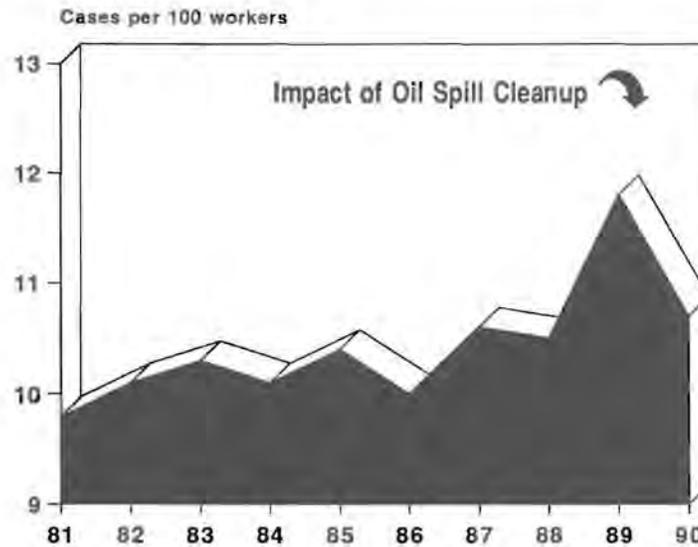
**Case Rates per 100 Workers  
Private Sector, Alaska 1981-1990**

	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990
TOTAL	10.0	10.3	10.6	10.3	10.7	10.2	10.9	10.8	12.3	11.1
Injury	9.8	10.1	10.3	10.1	10.4	10.0	10.6	10.5	11.8	10.7
Illness	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.5	0.3

Source: Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis Section, Occupational Safety and Health Statistics.

F i g u r e • 2

**OSHA Injury Case Rate  
Alaska Private Sector 1981-1990**



Source: Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis Section, Occupational Safety and Health Statistics.

will begin a new program to obtain a more comprehensive count of work related fatalities using multiple data sources.

### Private sector rate

Alaska's 1990 rate for all OSHA injuries and illnesses is up slightly from prior years. The 1990 private sector rate of 11.1 represents a modest increase from the rates of 10.9 and 10.8 recorded in 1987 and 1988, respectively. The 1989 rate of 12.3 is unusual because it includes the impact of the Prince William Sound oil spill cleanup project. The 1990 private sector rate for time loss cases is also slightly above the 1987-88 levels. The 1990 time loss case rate for the private industry is 5.2 cases per 100 workers.

### Time loss cases

In 1990, time loss cases accounted for 47% of OSHA injuries and illnesses. The Alaska Division of Workers' Compensation received 12,103 time loss case claims for 1990. Only 15% of these claims were from workers employed in state or local government. The largest

share of the time loss cases were from manufacturing, 24%. Workers in trade and service industries submitted 18% and 14% respectively of the total claims.

In Alaska's private sector an average of 15 days of work is lost for each time loss case. For the past three years the average number of lost days has been lower than any time since 1976. Alaska's rates for injury and illness cases are always higher than the U.S. average. Interestingly, Alaska's average number of days lost is usually lower than the U.S. average. This seems to suggest that Alaska's time loss injuries are more frequent in occurrence but slightly less severe.

Women workers accounted for 23% of the private sector time loss cases in 1990. Although women make up nearly half of the total work force, the majority of women are employed in less hazardous occupations.

### Rates creeping up in lower hazard industries

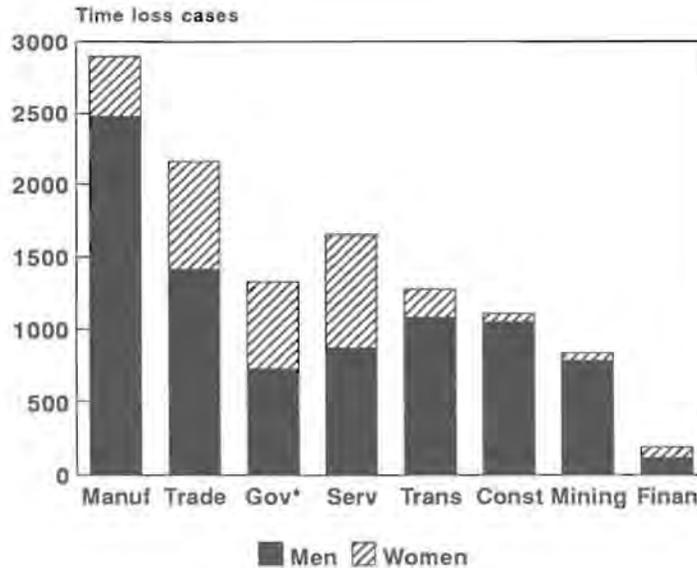
The industries which usually get the attention in articles such as this are the higher risk ones, such as manufacturing and construction. The private sector OSHA case rate is the sum of all industries. The lower rate industries do impact the private sector total because of their employment size. A look at the last few years' data shows that the injury and illness case rates in some lower risk industries have risen somewhat. In retail trade the total OSHA case rate has been above 10.0 for the last three years, whereas it was below that level for the prior seven years. Similarly, the rates in Services industries (6.2 in 1990) have been slightly higher in the last few years than in the early 1980s. Subtle changes in large lower rate industries are not a cause for alarm, but it is important to realize that they do impact the private sector total, which everyone watches closely.

Figure • 3

### Time Loss Cases Alaska 1990 by Sex and Industry

Note: \* Government here includes only state and local government.

Source: Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis Section, Occupational Safety and Health Statistics.



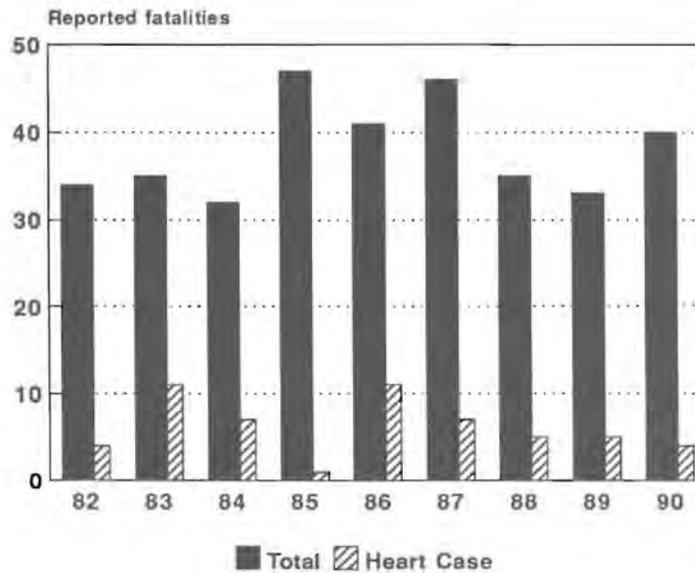
**Changes in Estimated OSHA Injuries and Employment  
Alaska 1989 and 1990**

	Injuries			Estimated Hours Worked (Millions)			Employment		
	1989	1990	% Change	1989	1990	% Change	1989	1990	% Change
Private Sector	15,681	15,922	1.5	265.7	287.5	8.2	156,467	165,035	5.5
Mining	1,061	1,329	25.3	23.2	27.2	17.2	10,247	11,475	12.0
Construction	1,443	1,480	2.6	16.6	20.1	21.1	9,798	10,503	7.2
Manufacturing	4,375	4,537	3.7	31.6	36.3	14.9	15,667	17,182	9.7
Transportation	2,855	2,167	-24.1	38.2	34.9	-8.6	21,169	20,622	-2.6
Trade	3,605	3,719	3.2	68.6	72.4	5.5	44,197	45,956	4.0
Finance	221	158	-28.5	15.9	17.3	8.8	9,244	9,165	-0.9
Services	1,974	2,399	21.5	69.8	77.5	11.0	45,899	49,819	8.5
State/Local Gov	2,982	2,939	-1.4	74.4	78.5	5.5	48,842	51,000	4.4

Source: Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis Section, Occupational Safety and Health Statistics.

F i g u r e • 4

**Reported Fatalities 1982-1990  
Alaska Workers' Compensation Division**



Source: Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis Section, Occupational Safety and Health Statistics.