

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/13/us/report-blames-safety-lapses-for-deaths-at-wyoming-job-sites.html?scp=1&sq=Report%20Blames%20Safety%20Lapses%20for%20an%20Epidemic%20of%20Deaths%20&st=cse>

New York Times

Report Blames Safety Lapses for an Epidemic of Deaths at Wyoming Job Sites

By DAN FROSCH

Published: January 12, 2012

DENVER — C. J. Moss was on the final day of his weeklong shift working in Wyoming's [oil](#) fields when he died. A burnt cable electrocuted Mr. Moss, 26, while he was cleaning part of a motor for a drilling rig, killing him instantly.



Natalie and C. J. Moss as newlyweds.

In a state with fewer than 600,000 residents, accidental deaths like Mr. Moss's, which occurred in February 2007 and has led to a lawsuit over who was responsible, have become disquietingly common. Wyoming, with its growing oil, gas and mining industries, is one of the most dangerous places in the United States to work.

A [report](#) compiled by an epidemiologist hired by the state and released on Jan. 3, found that Wyoming's work sites lacked what it called a culture of safety and that proper safety procedures were not followed in the vast majority of cases when someone was killed on the job.

The report also noted that Wyoming had the highest workplace fatality rate in the country for all but one year from 2003 through 2008. In 2010, the last year that data was provided, Wyoming's estimated occupational death rate was three and a half times the national average, the report said.

"Safety occurs as an afterthought," wrote Dr. Timothy Ryan, who was hired to study the problem by Dave Freudenthal, who was then the governor.

To be sure, Wyoming's oil and gas boom, which began in the 1990s, has drawn thousands of people with high-paying but dangerous jobs. In August, three workers were killed in Converse County after an explosion at an oil storage site.

The report also found that nearly half of the state's 622 deaths from 1992 to 2009 were transportation-related. Fatigue and failure to wear seat belts were factors, the report said.

"I believe that we must find ways to get workers in Wyoming home safely at the end of the day," Gov. Matt Mead said in a statement after the release of the report, which recommended that the state create a centralized system to better track data and that Wyoming's occupational safety and health administration better promote voluntary inspections.

But safety advocates say it has proven difficult to improve the situation. Oil and gas rig workers and their families are often itinerant, hold little political clout and fear that reporting safety problems could get them fired, said Laurie Goodman, a Wyoming lobbyist who has worked on occupational safety issues.

Local trial lawyers also said that while Wyoming law is designed to provide workers or their families money after an injury or death, employers are legally immune so long as they comply with the state's workers' compensation act, much like other states.

A lawsuit over Mr. Moss's death was settled last February after his wife, Natalie, sued her husband's direct supervisors — rare, but permissible in Wyoming — saying that they had known about the exposed cable but had done nothing, said Kristeen Hand, the Moss family's lawyer.

In 2009, Ms. Goodman and worker advocates tried unsuccessfully to get state lawmakers to pass a bill that would have made it easier for workers to file lawsuits after an accident.

"We have a system where there's no accountability, where the employer has no incentive to be responsive," said John Vincent, a former mayor of Riverton, who has represented the families of dead and injured oil and gas workers in his law practice and has worked on the legislative effort. "People are afraid to sue. They won't report injuries. They'll just stay at home until they get better."

Even Dr. Ryan said that he did not feel he received full political support in producing his report and that he had grown frustrated before stepping down from his post in December.

"The current Legislature is not interested in any new regulations that have to do with safety," Dr. Ryan said. "It got to the point where I wanted to see the action that's connected to these findings, and I decided it wasn't happening at a pace I was comfortable with."

Wyoming's powerful oil and gas industry says it has stepped up efforts to increase workplace safety over the past few years, but there is still considerable work to be done, said Jack Bedessem, vice president of the Wyoming Oil and Gas Industry Safety Alliance, which was formed in 2010.

The alliance has been working to improve safety awareness for supervisors and employees across the state and also trying to create more uniform training requirements, said Mr. Bedessem, chief executive of the Trihydro Corporation, a Laramie engineering company.

"I think Dr. Ryan characterized the issues Wyoming is facing fairly accurately," he said.

After the workplace death report, Governor Mead said he would implement some of its recommendations and make permanent the epidemiology position to specifically study the problem.

Natalie Moss said that such efforts have come too late for her, but are still critical for other families.

"It seems like people die out there all the time. They're leaving wives and children," Ms. Moss said. "What 26-year-old should have to plan a funeral?"