

Cell tower climbers surface as having the most dangerous job in America

January 30, 2006 - Based upon the latest national census of fatal occupational injuries from the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, workers who are required to climb cell towers and other communications structures throughout the country have been identified as having the most dangerous job in America.

In previous years, inaccurate Occupational Health and Safety Administration coding and an unknown total of tower climbers prevented the tower erection and maintenance industry from revealing the most fatalities per 100,000 workers.

Although tower climbers are one of the smallest specialized construction groups with approximately 8,700 employees, they had ten fatalities from workers falling from a tower in 2004, representing 115 deaths per 100,000 workers.

Logging workers captured the second most dangerous occupation with 85 fatalities in 2004, representing 92 deaths per 100,000 loggers.

The occupation most aligned to tower erectors, structural iron and steel workers, an industry group of approximately 67,000 workers, had 31 fatalities representing 47 deaths per 100,000 workers.

Rank	Occupation	Death rate per 100,000
1	Tower erectors/climbers	115.2
2	Logging workers	92.4
3	Aircraft pilots	92.4
4	Fishers and fishing workers	86.4
5	Structural iron and steel workers	47.0
6	Refuse and recyclable material collectors	43.2
7	Farmers and ranchers	37.5
8	Roofers	34.9
9	Electrical power line installers/repairers	30.0
10	Driver/sales workers and truck drivers	27.6

The good news is that the tower erection industry has seen a marked improvement during 2005 with a fatality count that dropped 30% to seven deaths. However, if total deaths in 2005 remain similar in all industries, it would still place the climber group as the fourth most dangerous job in the country with a death rate of 80.4 per 100,000 workers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics will release 2005's findings this September.

OSHA, the National Institute of Safety and Health, and the communications construction industry universally agree that there are too many fatalities every year from workers falling from telecommunications towers. There has always been disagreement regarding the methods the federal agencies use to gauge the industry's health.

OSHA's Jocko Vermillion, a Cleveland, Ohio, compliance and safety officer, was able to piece together the number of fatalities that involved tower climbers, an arduous task since the tower construction industry does not have its own Standard Industrial Classification code.

After perusing the many thousands of OSHA 36 forms - a pre-inspection form used to record data pertaining to a fatality which is completed at the time the event is initially reported to the agency - Vermillion was able to compile a more representative number of deaths in the telecommunications construction and maintenance industry.

Vermillion's research was further complicated because each OSHA office will oftentimes identify a SIC code that is not closely represented to the profession or one of the industrial subcategories.

Drop in fatality rate attributed to interventions

In reference to WirelessEstimator.com's industry analysis, Cleveland OSHA Director Rob Medlock said, "We really appreciate your exhaustive research and expanded statistics on tower fatalities and employee information. This is the first time we have received statistically credible data on the number of tower workers."

Medlock also noted that the data validates OSHA's findings with regard to the high fatality rates among tower workers, and they are pleased with the industry's improvement. "I believe the important trend to consider is that all the data shows a trend of decreasing fatalities over the last few years. I attribute this positive trend to the added focus on safety and health in the tower industry and increased oversight that has progressed over the past several years," he commented.

Medlock believes that through such interventions as OSHA's partnership with the National Association of Tower Erectors, they have been able to work more closely with the industry in providing training specifically developed for tower erectors. He stated that many safety related programs have been developed and widely distributed through various forums.

"Personally, I have never worked with an industry that has responded as well to the challenge as the tower industry; to think where they were ten years ago in comparison to today is remarkable. Nevertheless, we have a long way to go and there are still some bad actors out there that need to be addressed," Medlock explained.

Upon reviewing the most recent information identifying the industry's fatality ranking, Patrick Howey, Executive Director of NATE, said, "I am very pleased to see that research shows safety in the tower industry is improving. The tower erection, service and maintenance industry has come a long way in the last decade. Best practices for safety have been defined, and accompanying safety resources have been developed to address those aspects of working on towers where accidents happen. Everyone involved in that effort should be proud of what has been accomplished. At the same time, recent events in the industry are a sad reminder that we still have work to do."

"Tie or Die!" is daily mantra of most climbers

The majority of fatalities are the result of climbers not being tied off to a safe anchorage point at all times or relying upon faulty personal protection equipment. In addition, many deaths occurred during the erection, retrofitting or dismantling of a tower. "Tie or Die!" has become synonymous with the requirement for 100% fall protection. During the past ten years as the industry matured, it has been accepted as a common work practice among the majority of tower workers, although many will admittedly ignore the requirement when climbing or working in areas where they believe it is practical and expedient to do so. January's two deaths were attributed to dismantling errors and unacceptable safety practices on the ground that resulted in the climbers' deaths, not necessarily climber error.

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