

**STATEMENT FOR LABOR DAY 2010
BY NIOSH DIRECTOR JOHN HOWARD, M.D.**

In 2010, a day's work may involve anything from processing orders for a product over the internet to constructing gigantic wind turbines in the growing alternative-energy industry – from saving lives in an Intensive Care Unit to harvesting this year's food crop. On Labor Day we honor the diligence, determination, and skill of all working men and women.

Forty years ago, the U.S. identified safe and healthful workplaces as a national priority with the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act. Since then, we have come a long way in reducing the toll of job-related injury, illness, and death. Nevertheless, further progress remains to be made.

During the past year, we saw devastating losses of life in the Upper Big Branch coal mine disaster and the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion. For the general public, those tragedies in the same month brought home the concerns that drive the work of occupational safety and health professionals every day. We need to remain vigilant against occupational hazards. We need to understand why traditional dangers persist in spite of the strides we have made since 1970. We need to use that knowledge to prevent future pain, impairment, and loss of life.

At the same time, the changing nature of work in the 21st Century poses new challenges. For example, when vast numbers of workers are deployed in emergency response, as occurred in the Deepwater Horizon containment and cleanup, their safety and health must be a primary consideration. When new types or strains of infectious diseases emerge, such as the H1N1 flu, health-care workers are likely to be among those who are first or most directly exposed, and they must be adequately protected.

Last month, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported that the preliminary total number of fatal work injuries in 2009 was the lowest since it began keeping its census of occupational fatalities in 1992. This is welcome news, but we must be careful in our interpretations, as BLS also cautioned. Improvement was not found uniformly across all groups, and the numbers and rates are likely to be higher when final results are tabulated early next year. BLS also noted that total hours-worked fell in 2009, as they did in 2008, particularly in some industries such as construction that historically have accounted for a significant share of fatal injuries. This makes it difficult to benchmark true progress.

While we face significant challenges, we also have enormous opportunities as we rebuild our national economy and maintain our longstanding leadership in the global market. Investments in safe and healthy workplaces are really investments in keeping families strong, communities vibrant, responsible companies competitive, and society prepared for the future. In collaboration with diverse partners, NIOSH conducts and supports research to help realize those opportunities and to help weave health and safety into good business planning. As we in NIOSH celebrate the American spirit on Labor Day, we also renew our commitment to our nation's vision of safe and healthy work for all workers.



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