

Extreme heat wave claims 33 lives in western US as Biden administration promotes inadequate “heat protection rules”

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A record-breaking heat wave is continuing to hammer the western part of the United States, endangering more than 161 million people who remain under heat advisory warnings. At least 33 people have tragically died since the beginning of July, with those deaths concentrated in California and Oregon. At least seven cities including Las Vegas, Phoenix and Salt Lake City reached record-breaking temperatures this week, pointing to the exacerbating dangers of capitalist-induced climate change.

The state of Oregon is experiencing the most significant heat wave in the state’s history, with record-breaking temperatures soaring to 110 degrees Fahrenheit (43 Celsius). Since the start of the heat wave last week, the Oregon state medical examiner has relayed that 14 people have died in the state due to heat-related illnesses. Eight of those who have died were over 60 years old and three were between the ages of 25 and 35. Cities such as Portland, Salem and Eugene have broken their temperature records and recorded their highest number of consecutive days with triple-digit temperatures. While temperatures are forecast to cool in Northwest Oregon in the upcoming week, much of Southern and Eastern Oregon will continue to suffer under the triple-digit temperatures.

The extended duration of this triple-digit heat, which lasts into the night, poses serious problems for those without access to air conditioning who will not be able to cool off sufficiently at night. Climatologists warn Oregonians that they should expect summers to continue to get hotter, due to the global trend of hotter and drier summers resulting from climate change.

At least 19 people have died in Northern California as of Friday. The Sacramento County Coroner’s office reported that a 58-year-old died from multi-organ failure due to heat stroke. Emergency room physicians in the South Bay are reporting large numbers of heat emergency admissions due to heat stroke and officials have noted that only four of the 19 were homeless, indicating that at least 15 have housing

but still lack protection from the heat. The names and details of those who have died have not been released.

The severest of the heat wave has been concentrated in California’s Central Valley, where the weather is forecast for 10 days or more of 110-degree heat. In the city of Chowchilla, an inmate at the largest women’s prison in California died of heat-related illness as the prison population continues to suffer without proper air conditioning and as inmates continue to beg for relief from the devastating heat.

As of Friday, Las Vegas, Nevada, recorded a fifth consecutive day of 115-degree temperatures (46C), an all-time record that is likely to continue, or even double in the coming days. The temperatures are groundbreaking even by desert standards, with forecasters deeming the heat wave unprecedented since the National Weather Service began keeping records in 1937. The dangerous temperatures have already claimed at least nine victims, with officials stating that the toll is likely to be higher.

In the hottest major US metro region, Phoenix, Arizona, death tolls from extreme heat continue to rise every year in Maricopa County. Last year, 645 heat-associated deaths were recorded. The number of heat-related deaths this year has almost doubled in comparison with the number of deaths in the same period last year. The number of possible heat-related deaths as reported by the Maricopa County medical examiner was 175 as of June 29. The average temperature recorded this June has made the month the hottest ever recorded in the city.

Officials continue to warn about the dangerous cumulative aspect of the heat wave, which has not allowed the human body to properly recover as temperatures have not dropped below 80 degrees. The danger posed by the scorching heat wave is compounded for the most vulnerable populations including the elderly, homeless and those with limited or no access to air conditioning or water. Particularly affected are those who are forced to work under extreme heat, such as

factory workers and Amazon and UPS workers, whose industries have become synonymous with injury and heatstroke.

The response from the Biden administration to the deadly heat wave has been to promote supposed “heat protection rules” that it claims will protect indoor and outdoor workers from the extreme temperatures. The rules, which were previously proposed by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), include a list of highly inadequate measures designed to keep workers on the job in extreme heat, all while implementing meager requirements for drinking water, rest breaks and monitoring. Adding insult to injury, part of the plan includes the requirement for factories to accustom workers to toiling in high-heat conditions.

Under the proposed rules, OSHA would establish two heat index thresholds. The first, Initial Heat Trigger, which kicks in at 80 degrees Fahrenheit (27C), requires employers to provide drinking water and break areas as needed. Significantly, the rule indicates that employers also are required to have “acclimatization protocols for new and returning unacclimatized employees,” in simple terms, this means a plan is required for workers to gradually increase their workload and heat exposure so their bodies can become adjusted to working in extreme heat.

The second threshold, known as the High Heat Trigger, kicks in at 90 degrees Fahrenheit (32C), and requires employers to monitor signs of heat illness and provide mandatory 15-minute rest breaks every two hours. Employers are also required to check on “lone workers” every few hours and to issue an alert to stay hydrated. As of now, only five states maintain such protections.

What is strikingly evident in the ill-named “heat protection rules” is that it never indicates a temperature too great to trigger a call to halt work. Employers are expected to post “warning signs at indoor work areas with ambient temperatures that regularly exceed 120°F.” Such signage that condescendingly states the obvious means that farmworkers are still expected to toil in 120-degree heat (49C) so long as there is a warning sign, and they will only be guaranteed water and “mandatory rest breaks of 15 minutes at least every two hours (unpaid meal break may count as a rest break).”

Furthermore, there are a number of exceptions for workers in key industries for whom the inadequate rules will not apply. Those who will not be covered under the rules include all categories not covered by OSHA; those are “self-employed workers, immediate family members of farm employers, and workers whose hazards are regulated by another federal agency (for example, the Mine Safety and Health Administration, the Department of Energy, Federal Aviation Administration, or Coast Guard)” according to the

US Department of Labor’s website.

The heat protection rules the Biden administration is touting had been proposed and formulated by OSHA by at least 2021, and will hardly do anything to slow down the death toll. Their main purpose seems to provide legal cover and liability to maximize productivity and profit surplus for the corporations. There is little doubt that Washington is concerned that it should appear as if measures are being taken to halt the skyrocketing deaths of the elderly and workers across industries including the hyper-exploited agricultural workers.

Heat exposure is the leading cause of death among farm workers, whose average life expectancy in the US is a mere 49 years, compared to 73 for the general population, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This is equivalent to the average life expectancy in the country in the year 1900. In the United States alone, exposure to environmental heat killed 999 US workers from 1992 to 2021, averaging 33 fatalities a year, according to the Department of Labor. However, the agency stated that the statistics for occupational heat-related illnesses, injuries and deaths are likely “vast underestimates.”

Internationally, the statistics of heat-related deaths and illnesses reflect the failure of the global capitalist system. According to a report by the UN, climate change-related health risks continue to affect more than 70 percent of workers around the world, with at least 2.4 billion people likely to be exposed to excessive heat on the job. Excessive heat and solar UV radiation have resulted in an increase in certain diseases having a severe impact on the safety and health of workers.

The UN report states that more than 26.2 million people currently live with chronic kidney disease related to workplace heat stress, while nearly 19,000 people die each year from non-melanoma skin cancer from exposure to solar UV radiation. As for excessive heat, an estimated 18,970 lives are lost each year due to occupational injuries attributable to excessive heat.



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