
HAZARD ID



ASPHALT INDUSTRY UPDATE
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The asphalt and bitumen industry is an inherently dangerous and high-risk industry with a high potential for catastrophic incidents to occur. The AWU has been representing members in the asphalt industry for decades, and we continue to advocate for greater awareness regarding the many variable occupational health and safety concerns that our members face daily.

In recent times the AWU has been lobbying the regulators and industry to highlight the exposure to carcinogenic substances such as diesel, bitumen fumes and silica dust among others. We are well on our way to developing guidance material, in collaboration with industry, for a “best practice” document to be published by WorkSafe upon completion.

These guidance materials will be used as a resource to ensure employers and employees are aware of all risks in the workplace, how to minimise exposure to these risks and to ensure your long-term health is unaffected by workplace exposure.

Highlighting the exposure risks and finding solutions to these known hazards is critical to keeping members safe and moving the industry forward, but these are far from the only dangers our members face in the industry.

The hazards involved in the asphalt and bitumen industry are almost endless. This can lead to complacency or the feeling that it’s “just part of the job”. Employers have a duty to maintain a workplace that is safe and without risk for all workers and these hazards must be controlled in all circumstances. Unfortunately, we are continuing to see examples of asphalt crews entering work sites such as subdivisions that are clearly not ready for asphalt crews and also not ready for the work to go ahead.

We have seen exposed pits and trenches, unfilled backs of curbs, no traffic control etc. This is unacceptable and workers should not be put into this position or pressured to perform work under these circumstances. Laying asphalt is dangerous enough without having to tightrope walk on the edge of a curb, and risk falling into a pit or tripping onto 170°C asphalt.

ASPHALT HAZARD ID UPDATE



In recent years there have been several serious incidents involving people and plant which has led to horrifying and life changing injuries to workers, including crushing of limbs and body, amputations and lacerations requiring complex surgery and most recently, a death involving a bobcat.

These catastrophic incidents must stop. The AWU will not accept that these life changing injuries and deaths could not have been avoided. Employers must do more to ensure workers go home safe and without injury and are supported when reporting safety concerns.

The Safe Work Australia statistics from 2017 – 2020 state that there were eight deaths in road and bridge construction nationally and 76 accepted workplace injury claims between 2015 – 2020 in the bitumen industry, though we believe that figure is likely much higher.

The AWU represent all the major asphalt companies and have a very strong membership across the industry, however the membership only makes up a small percentage of total AWU members when compared to other AWU industries such as steel, aluminium and glass manufacturing, offshore oil and gas, agriculture, DELWP, etc.

Sadly, the asphalt industry makes up approximately one in five of all AWU referrals to Maurice Blackburn for work injuries. This is a shocking statistic, particularly considering many of these injuries are older injuries, sustained in the workplace and not immediately reported or ignored by the employer when reported.

There has been a horrific spate of traffic controller (TC's) deaths in recent years, with the 1 year anniversary of the death of AWU member Timmy Rakei, killed by a drug affected driver while setting up a traffic site. TC's are the first, and last line of defence on mobile workplaces, and these deaths MUST STOP.

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The AWU are pushing for industry reform, with both regulators and industry at the table, working through the development of a new code of practice, designed to reduce the accessibility of cowboy companies tendering on high-risk motorways, with an emphasis on higher levels of risk controls to become mandatory to keep workers safe and out of the line of fire.

The lack of near miss reporting across the fully casualised and vulnerable industry is part of the reason the data available to force the regulators to act has delayed these actions. The AWU has been advocating and lobbying concerns to both WorkSafe and DoT for years, and are now finally seeing action.

HSR representation and a pro-reporting culture where workers can comfortably and easily report unsafe work practises, without fear of reprisal, is key to both these industries moving forward to eventually eliminate workplace deaths and life changing injuries occurring. Workers have the right to come home to their families safely and the AWU are fighting like hell to ensure these incidents become a thing of the past.



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