Protecting Workers From Noise-Induced Hearing Loss

KEY POINTS:
• The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requires green industry employers to have employee hearing conservation programs in place when loud noise reaches a certain level over a specific time period.
• An excellent resource on OSHA’s “Noise Exposure Standard” requirements is federal OSHA’s Safety and Health Topics Pages. (Search for “Noise and Hearing Conservation.”)
• A number of landscape contractors have been surprised to learn during voluntary State OSHA Consultation Program visits that they meet the requirements for a hearing conservation program. Even without such a mandate, it’s important to provide hearing protection and take other measures to reduce your employees’ exposure to loud noises.

Checklist for Employers on Protection From Noise-Induced Hearing Loss
✓ Ensure that your employees understand that hearing loss is irreversible.
✓ Know that noise-induced hearing loss may result from working around loud equipment and machinery or from operating vehicles such as motorcycles or all-terrain vehicles (ATVs).
✓ Provide your employees with hearing protection to protect them from loud noise and irreversible hearing damage. Earplugs (either disposable or reusable) are a common and inexpensive means of hearing protection. Earmuffs (the kind that protect the ears from loud noises) are another good option.
✓ Keep all equipment and machinery in good repair. That can help reduce noise levels.
✓ If possible, rotate employees who will be performing tasks that may be harmful to their hearing. Also, try to alternate these tasks with work that is less noisy.
✓ Recommend that employees get their hearing tested by a certified audiologist (hearing specialist) if you observe any signs of hearing loss. Remember that a worker who is hard of hearing may not be able to hear critical safety warnings, resulting in a serious and costly injury or even death.
✓ Visit the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Web page on Noise and Hearing Loss Prevention for more information.

Employees’ Checklist on Preventing Noise-Induced Hearing Loss
✓ Know that hearing loss resulting from regular exposure to loud noises is permanent. However, it can be prevented. One of the best ways to prevent it is to wear earplugs, earmuffs, or other hearing protection when working around equipment or other loud noise.
✓ Stuffing cotton in your ears will not protect you from hearing loss.
✓ Know that one of the first signs of hearing loss may be a ringing in your ears. This ringing, which may also be a hissing, roaring, whistling, or chirping sound, is called “tinnitus.” If you hear these sounds, have your hearing checked by an audiologist.
✓ Keep your earplugs or earmuffs in a location where they are readily available. Don’t leave them on the dashboard of your truck or in an office when you are heading to a job site.
Tips on Conducting PPE Hazard Assessments

KEY POINTS:
• OSHA requires green industry company employers to conduct written hazard assessments to identify situations where personal protective equipment (PPE) must be used.
• Yet many green industry employers fail to do this — either because of unfamiliarity with the regulation or because it involves extra time and paperwork.
• In the October 2006 through September 2007 federal fiscal year, a failure to comply with OSHA’s “PPE — General Requirements” Standard was the top-cited violation among companies in our industry. A failure to comply with OSHA’s requirements for eye, face, and head protection also ranked among the top 10 most commonly cited violations.
• A good resource on OSHA’s PPE requirements is federal OSHA’s Safety and Health Topics Pages. Also see the January 2008 issue of Safety Sense for an article entitled “Enforcing the Use of Personal Protective Equipment.”
• Reminder: Federal OSHA recently announced that employers are required to pay for PPE for their employees. The only exceptions are for ordinary safety-toed footwear, ordinary prescription safety eyewear, logging boots, and ordinary clothing and weather-related gear.

PPE Hazard Assessment Dos and Don’ts
DO —
• Identify the potential hazards your employees may encounter in their daily jobs. These may include such hazards as loud noise, falling objects, sharp objects, heat and high temperatures, exposure to silica dust, and/or other hazards.
• Determine whether any of these hazards can be eliminated or reduced. Providing PPE should be your last line of defense if a hazard cannot be controlled.
• Write down the types of PPE that will be provided. Then provide it at no cost to employees.

DON’T —
• Neglect to put your PPE hazard assessments into writing.
• Forget to look at all potential hazards, even those that may only occur periodically.
• Allow employees to work without using the appropriate PPE.

PPE Hazard Assessment Checklist for Employers
✓ Conduct a “walk-through” of each area of your operation to identify where hazards exist.
✓ Write down the hazards you see. Then determine the type of PPE that will be needed if the hazard cannot be controlled by engineering or other means.
✓ Involve your supervisors in your written PPE hazard assessments. Have them sign and date the hazard assessments so you have a record of when the assessments were conducted.
✓ Be prepared to show an OSHA inspector your written PPE hazard assessments, particularly if you are investigated for a potential PPE violation.

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