COVID-19 Guidance on the Use of Cloth Face Coverings while Working Outdoors in Hot and Humid Conditions

During the COVID-19 pandemic, OSHA generally recommends that employers encourage workers to wear cloth face coverings at work to help reduce the spread of COVID-19. However, workers who wear cloth face coverings in hot and humid environments or while performing strenuous activities outdoors, such as those in agriculture, landscaping, construction, delivery services, and oil and gas operations, can find cloth face coverings to be uncomfortable.

Employers should follow the below practices to protect against the spread of COVID-19 and the risk of heat-related illness:

- Acclimatize new and returning workers to environmental and work conditions while wearing cloth face coverings.

- Prioritize the use of cloth face coverings when workers are in close contact with others (less than 6 feet), such as during group travel or shift meetings.

- Allow workers to remove cloth face coverings when they can safely maintain at least 6 feet of physical distance from others.

- Evaluate the feasibility of wearing cloth face coverings for each worker and consider alternatives (e.g., face shields) when appropriate.

Photo: USDA

- Increase the frequency of hydration and rest breaks in shaded, non-enclosed, or air conditioned areas.

- Incorporate at least 6 feet of physical distancing into break areas by staggering breaks, spacing workers, and limiting the number of workers on break at a time, where feasible.

- Allow workers to return to personal vehicles during breaks to use air conditioning, when possible. Multiple workers should generally not return to the same car.

- If fans are used, avoid directing the fan so it pushes air over multiple people at the same time, since fans may increase the distance respiratory droplets can travel.

- Encourage workers to use cloth face coverings that optimize fit and comfort, are made out of breathable, moisture-wicking materials, and use light colors when working in direct sunlight.

- Encourage workers to change cloth face coverings when wet, as wet face coverings make it more difficult to breathe and are not as effective. Provide clean replacement cloth face coverings or disposable face masks, as needed, for workers to change into throughout the work shift.

- Ensure workers use handwashing facilities or hand sanitizers with at least 60% alcohol often, as heat or moisture build-up may cause workers to put on and take off cloth face coverings frequently.

- Avoid scheduling strenuous tasks during the hottest parts of the day and alter work shifts to cooler parts of the day, when possible.

- Allow workers to wear personal passive cooling items (e.g., icepack vests, cooling bandanas) and loose-fitting and breathable clothes, as long as these items do not present a safety hazard.

- Plan for heat emergencies and train workers on heat stress prevention and treatment.

- Increase the frequency of communication to workers and encourage workers to monitor themselves and others for signs of heat illness.

Note: Cloth face coverings should not be used as a substitute for engineering and administrative controls, safe work practices, or necessary personal protective equipment (PPE).

For interim guidance and other resources on protecting workers from COVID-19, visit OSHA's COVID-19 webpage.

For guidance and other resources on protecting workers from heat stress, visit OSHA's occupational heat exposure webpage.

For guidance on heat illness prevention during the COVID-19 pandemic, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's webpages for workers and employers.

For the latest information on the symptoms, prevention, and treatment of COVID-19, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's COVID-19 webpage.

For the latest information on masks, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's COVID-19 and masks webpage.

For the latest information on COVID-19 in the workplace, visit the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's COVID-19 webpage. ◼