



Health & Safety

MATTERS

Health & Safety Information for GMB Safety Reps

Climate Change - The Impact on the Workplace

Introduction

As environmental issues rise up the personal and political agenda previously unknown phrases suddenly enter common usage. Currently, one of these is Climate Change. As usual with a new phrase, there is often an imprecise understanding on what it means. This can be best illustrated by the difference between weather and climate. In very basic terms this can be defined as:-

Climate = average weather in a locality over a set period (for example 30 years), and,
Weather = what is happening outside on any given day.

Many of the predictions for the next 30-40 years see the UK, particularly in the south, as having some form of benign Mediterranean climate where the greatest spin-off will be the ability to make local wine. As a lifestyle this might be attractive but the impact on the workplace could be much greater and have serious implications for many GMB members as more extremes of weather result from climate change.

What are the possible outcomes from such change?

Some of the changes are fairly obvious - rising temperatures at work obviously springs to mind. Already many GMB members complain on a regular basis to their employers during the summer months in Britain of a problem which seems to be getting worse year on year. Other areas are not so immediately apparent, last years summer floods were devastating for those whose homes were affected. Less well reported are the businesses which went bankrupt due to the inability to trade, even where they may have taken precautions to ensure adequate flood defences for themselves. Other factors can put them out of business, such as where energy or water supplies get cut off it means that even those who can access their own workplaces cannot operate resulting in lost business and redundancies.

What are the expected climate changes in the UK?

There are two areas of change which will become most noticeable in respect of climate change. The first arises in seasonal/annual averages, these become warmer and drier most of the year, with wetter winters and rising sea levels.

The second is the extremes in weather, more hot days, more intense downpours of rain, shorter return periods for high water tides and uncertain changes in storms. More hot days can lead to roads melting causing both short term transport difficulties and larger repair bills.

GMB SAFETY REPS

Regional Health & Safety Officer: Tristan Chard
Regional Secretary: Tim Roache

Making Your Workplace Safer

GMB – Grove Hall
WAKEFIELD
WF1 3RN
Telephone: 01924 882255

Even within the UK there may well be regional temperature variations of as much as 9°C between a rural northern location of the country and an urban southern one.

What are the responses to these threats?

The twin methods in dealing with this problem are (i) to address the removal of the causes and (ii) by controlling its effects.

These are often classified as *mitigation* and *adaptation*.

Mitigation slows down global warming by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It is important to note that even if we as a race manage to reduce greenhouse gas emissions relatively soon, this will not begin to take effect on our collective climate, for up to 40 years, due to previous greenhouse gas build up affecting the planets atmosphere.

Adaptation is a response to the predicted aspects of climate change and means that we have to take measures which will decrease the risk from hazards which arise; this will mean insulating workplaces against the rise in temperatures, ensuring adequate flood defences and allocating resources towards the planning of buildings, defences, infrastructure and transport routes.

Who will need to prepare for this?

Obviously this is ultimately everyone's responsibility. However, it is clear that those areas listed above come under the remit of the state at different levels. Expecting the private sector to contribute towards this is much too optimistic. In the USA recent fires brought out private sector companies offering emergency services only to those who could afford to pay, those who couldn't were left to fend for themselves. In the UK as the effects of climate change become more apparent perhaps tax revenues will need to rise to deal with this in the future.

GMB reps can play their part in helping address some of these issues. Even though there are no official "environmental" reps, many existing safety reps already take up issues of environmental concern on behalf of the membership. There is to be consultation on a new ACAS code for facilities in the coming year and GMB will be looking for an opportunity to influence environmental aspects in this. GMB are also involved with other trade unions on TUSDAC (Trade Unions for Sustainable Development Action Campaign) and will be paying much more attention to environmental aspects in the year ahead. For more information on this or other environmental issues, please contact tristan.chard@gmb.org.uk

General Secretary
Paul Kenny
GMB
22-24 Worple Road
London SW19 4DD