

## *Safety on the Job*

The environment at Yellowstone poses unusual risks for many of its employees. Providing for the enjoyment and safety of park visitors requires that rangers patrol roads during all hours of the day and cross backcountry rivers to evaluate trail access and determine safe places for visitors to ford. Maintenance workers may be exposed to hazardous materials and conditions as they keep the roads maintained and the utility systems operating. Employees cutting down trees, fighting fires, and handling animals for research or management purposes face a wide range of hazards. Even routine travel around the park can turn dangerous in blizzards and subzero temperatures.

While Yellowstone tends to attract employees with can-do attitudes who enjoy the challenge of difficult work in harsh environments, the NPS culture can itself create unrealistic expectations about what employees can and should be able to accomplish. When combined with financial pressures to do more with less, increased park visitation and work loads, a difficult physical environment, a failing infrastructure, and distance from medical facilities, such expectations can produce potentially dangerous working conditions.

### INTEGRATED SAFETY MANAGEMENT

**An accident-prone park?** Compared to other government agencies, the National Park Service has a poor employee safety record, and Yellowstone's has been even worse. While the accident rate among Yellowstone visitors appears to lie within the expected range, the annual rate per 100 employees has been 16 to 18 percent during the last seven years; the NPS average is 6.7 percent. In the private sector, even those industries involving relatively hazardous occupations such as mining or oil and gas extraction, accident rates generally fall below 6 percent. Since 1994, Yellowstone has had an annual average of 62 on-the-job accidents that required employees to receive medical attention, and workers' compensation claims have cost an average of \$563,000 a year. Since 1992, six people have died in work-related accidents—four NPS employees and two visiting researchers—each a tragedy for Yellowstone. Three of these fatalities resulted from backcountry avalanches; two others occurred while rangers were patrolling familiar ground in hazardous conditions, one on snowmobile and one kayaking on a backcountry lake; and one maintenance employee died while testing a snowmobile.

**A wake-up call.** For many years, Yellowstone's safety program was generally regarded as the responsibility of the safety officer rather than of individual managers and employees, and it focussed on reacting to specific accidents and workplace hazards rather than on a continuous effort to improve the safety of work practices and conditions. Then in a 1997 review conducted by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), Yellowstone was cited for 600 violations, 93 of which were considered serious, and many of which demanded

immediate correction. Most involved similar infractions occurring in different park locations—180 cases of frayed electrical cords, improper grounding, or improper extension cord usage; 97 fire extinguisher violations; 95 blocked or unsigned exits; and 84 machines without proper equipment guards or anchors. But the OSHA inspectors also perceived an attitude among staff at all levels that working in the park was inherently risky, and that park managers were not attentive to safety relative to other work priorities. With awareness raised by the recent frequency of on-the-job fatalities, the OSHA report served as a call for fundamental changes in how Yellowstone addresses safety and health in the workplace.

## RECENT PROGRESS

**A commitment to improve.** Like visitor safety, park employee safety cannot be guaranteed, but Yellowstone has made a commitment to create a work environment in which employees can choose to behave in the safest possible manner. At Yellowstone, park managers are now expected to support and enforce a policy of “zero tolerance” for excuses, shortcuts, or cost-cutting measures that could threaten employee safety. They have been encouraged to adopt management processes that continuously trigger and reinforce safe job performance, and to tackle tough safety issues and remove barriers to safety improvements.

To become a model of safety excellence throughout the NPS has become a Yellowstone priority; it must also become each employee’s responsibility. Evaluations of job performance at all levels will take risk management into consideration, and employees will be rewarded for taking an active role in efforts to improve their own and their coworkers’ safety. In 1997, Yellowstone set a goal of reducing the number of on-the-job accidents by 10 percent each year for the next five years; \$220,000 (about one percent of the park’s annual budget) was allocated for this purpose in 1998 and another \$100,00 in 1999.

**Assistance from OSHA.** After the release of their report, OSHA safety officers agreed to a partnership with Yellowstone to help park managers analyze high-risk activities and identify the appropriate safety equipment, training, and precautions needed to minimize accidents. With a commitment from OSHA to provide technical assistance, safety program development, and training resources, Yellowstone has promised to reduce all identified hazards and set up a park-wide internal safety audit and accountability system.

By October 1998, supervisors in all park divisions had attended new safety training, corrected as many of the noted deficiencies as possible, and outlined plans to address those that remained. The number of employees injured on the job had declined significantly from 1997, and employees sensed a attitudinal change in their peers and supervisors in emphasizing safety while accomplishing their assigned tasks.

**Back to work.** To minimize workers' compensation costs and encourage employee rehabilitation, Yellowstone initiated a back-to-work program in 1995 that enables employees who have had on-the-job accidents to work on alternate assignments during their recovery period. A new policy will also enable the park to bill employees for expenses that result from motor vehicle accidents in which the employee is found negligent. However, greater effort should be made to investigate accidents and take corrective action, including communication of the lesson learned to other employees.

*Program Needs*

Despite the special funds that were allocated to correct safety deficiencies following the OSHA inspections in 1997–98, a long list of unmet needs remains. Many problems result from the park's use of historic buildings and facilities that are not up to current codes and standards (see "Buildings and Grounds," page 7–22). Other steps that should be taken include:

- establishing safety accountability systems;
- aligning goals and objectives with the safety vision;
- aligning operational work to attain the safety mission;
- developing and implementing a behavioral management system;
- developing and implementing a reliable incident investigation and analysis system;
- fully implementing the Occupational Workers' Compensation Program case management system;
- fully complying with OSHA, NPS, and other standards;
- effectively training all employees in required safety and health elements;
- increasing involvement of all employees for improving safety;
- providing better safety and personal protective equipment;
- improving supervision for safety coaching, feedback, positive reinforcement, and rewards;
- increasing celebration and reward for safety achievement and continuous improvement; and
- continuing the budgetary commitment to the safety program.



## SAFETY PROGRAM

### STEWARDSHIP GOALS



Park staff embrace safety as a personal and organizational value and integrate safety excellence into all park operations, minimizing accidents and OWCP claims.



Park managers at all levels demonstrate safety leadership and support safe behavior. All OSHA and NPS requirements are met.

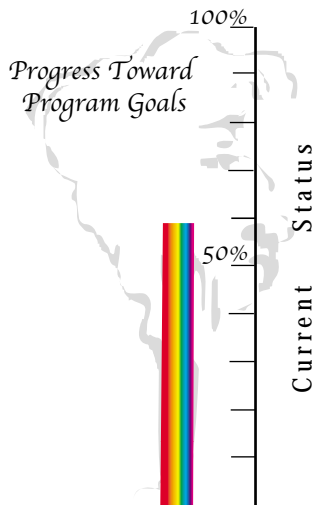
### CURRENT STATE OF PROGRAM



Integrated safety management and continuous safety improvement are not yet part of workplace culture, but a new safety direction, an OSHA partnership, and high-level management commitment to safety excellence are in place.



Since 1997, managers have received additional training, direction, and funds to rectify identified deficiencies in training, equipment, and operational procedures. At-risk behavior is still overlooked and some supervisors do not reinforce safe work practices, but major improvements have been made in specific OSHA programs.



### 1998 FUNDING AND STAFF

Recurring Funds	
Yellowstone N.P. Base Budget	\$311,400
Staff	2.0 FTE

The human resources and funding necessary to professionally and effectively manage the park to stewardship levels will be identified in the park business plan.