



# Opening Statement

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & LABOR

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The Hon. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott • Chairman

## **Opening Statement of Chair Alma Adams (NC-12)**

Subcommittee on Workforce Protections Hearing

*From the Fields to the Factories: Preventing Workplace Injury and Death from Excessive Heat*

2175 Rayburn House Office Building

Thursday, July 11, 2019 | 10:15 a.m.

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Today, we are here to discuss the serious hazards of excessive heat exposure in the workplace and the need for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA, to protect American workers.

We are not talking about being uncomfortable on a hot day. We are talking about excessive heat, combined with heavy clothing and high humidity, that can incapacitate our body's natural cooling mechanisms and lead to injury and sometimes death. This hearing will explore common-sense measures that employers can take to prevent these tragedies.

In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that, from 1992 through 2016, exposure to excessive environmental heat killed 783 U.S. workers and seriously injured 69,374.

And the problem is getting worse. While those working in air-conditioned offices may not notice, climate change is all too real for the roofer, the warehouse worker, the farm worker, and the highway worker who works for 8, 10, or 12 hours a day in record-breaking heat.

According to the Fourth U.S. National Climate Assessment, this warming trend is likely to only accelerate. 2017 was the second-hottest year on record, surpassed only by 2016. Last week, we even saw record-breaking heat in Alaska. Who would ever have thought that workers in Alaska would have to worry about the risks of heat-related illness?

The real impact of excessive heat on our country's workers is tragic. Just last summer:

A Florida landscaper suffered multiple organ failures, severe dehydration, and hyperthermia and died from heat stroke after using a lawn-edger for 6 hours in 100-degree heat.

Georgia farmworker Miguel Angel Guzman Chavez, 24, died of heat stroke after picking tomatoes in direct sunlight with temperatures up to 97.5 degrees.

And, just a few years ago, in my own state of North Carolina, a 56-year-old farm worker died of heat stroke after spending three days harvesting tobacco with a core body temperature of 108 degrees.

The good news is that we know how to prevent these tragedies. For workers on farms, highways, construction sites, and other outdoor workers, providing water and rest in cool, shaded areas can save lives. And, for indoor workers in factories, laundries, steel mills and lead smelters, there are practical measures that can keep workers healthy.

These are not radical requirements. As we will hear today, the U.S. Army already maintains a rigorous heat standard to keep our servicemembers healthy and ready to carry out their missions. The National Institute for

Occupational Safety and Health has also issued workplace safety guidance and a recommended standard addressing excessive heat. Finally, three states have adopted their own standards.

Yet, there is still no nationwide safety standard for excessive heat, leaving millions of workers without basic workplace protections.

That is why, during this hearing, we will also assess H.R. \_\_\_\_, the *Asuncion Valdivia Heat Illness and Fatality Prevention Act of 2019*, introduced by Representative Judy Chu, who will testify today. This legislation would require OSHA to issue a standard within 42 months that would mandate employers to provide both indoor and outdoor workers exposed to excessive heat with the protections they need. Specifically, the bill would require the implementation of well-recognized safety measures, taking into consideration the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's recommendations, as well as a heat standard that is no less protective than those already in-place in states like California.

OSHA may object that it doesn't have the resources to quickly complete a standard. However, we must remember that Congress cut OSHA's budget for standards by 10 percent in FY17 – a short-sighted decrease that the Democratic majority is fighting to reverse. And it is currently squandering its scarce resources on rulemaking efforts that roll back the protections that workers already have instead of moving forward on new protections that workers need.

At its heart, this hearing is about basic workplace safety protections that all workers need do their jobs and stay safe. Each day, our military servicemembers—arguably our toughest, most in-shape workforce—rely on protections against excessive heat to ensure they can defend our country. Surely, we can agree that the millions of workers, who also endure intense heat each day to ensure our country runs smoothly, deserve those protections as well.

I want to thank the witnesses for their testimony and express my appreciation for those of you who have traveled long distances to be with us today.

I now yield to the distinguished Ranking Member, Mr Byrne for an opening statement.