

Winter no reason to halt construction

By Tara Marion

Though cold temperatures slow down the industry, the end of summer is no reason to stop commercial construction.

By taking some extra precautions, construction workers can continue projects during the fall and winter months to avoid seasonal delays.

Temperatures that are uncomfortable for construction workers also are unfavorable for certain aspects of construction, such as digging basements, installing foundations and pouring concrete, which is why construction slows down in the winter.

When the weather cools, construction workers need to modify their construction practices to prevent the negative impact of cold temperatures on building, just as they need to protect themselves with additional clothing and work provisions, construction experts said.

Though the **Michigan Occupation Safety and Health Administration** has no standard for cold-weather safety, sources from the agency and construction-management industry suggest using common sense to stay safe and warm.

One key to comfort and warmth is layered clothing.

“Most people who work in construction dress appropriately,” said Matt Wolf, vice president of **Cornerstone Construction Management Inc.** in Portage. “They are dressed with double-layer socks, insulated boots, long underwear and long pants.”

Protective clothing helps prevent hypothermia or frostbite, which are caused by prolonged exposure to the cold.

“Frostbite can be serious,” said Bob Pawlowski, director of MIOSHA’s construction safety and health division in Lansing. “People can lose limbs from frostbite, so we always recommend that employers provide training on some of the warning factors.”

Insulating against the cold can create a potential safety hazard, however, as movement is restricted by layered clothing, winter coats, hats, gloves and boots.

“The fact that you have to wear all that protective clothing could create an environment where accidents are more likely to take place,” Pawlowski said. Some of the restrictions of movement could become a hazard in some situations.”

When hands become less flexible because of cold or big mittens that make it difficult to grasp, they’re more likely to drop things, such as tools, or slip when climbing scaffolds, for example, he said.

For continuous work in cold temperatures, heated shelters, such as tents or trailers, should be available to construction workers at commercial job sites. The level of protection provided by construction companies is often money driven, Wolf said.

“Sometimes a large company is willing to pay for the construction of a tent that encapsulates the whole construction site” and is heated, he said.

Another option is to frame up the building, heat it and then build the inside walls.

When neither of these options is available, workers should follow a work/rest regimen.

“The colder the weather gets, you might want to set up a work/rest regimen where you work for an hour and then warm up for 15 minutes,” Pawlowski explained. “You may need to shorten the work times to 45 minutes depending on the temperature and the conditions.”

Because of construction material advancement, builders needn’t be interrupted or delayed by the arrival of winter.

“That’s become less of a factor over the years because of newer technologies in terms of concrete, for example, so more and more we see construction work continuing into the cold weather,” Pawlowski said.