

National Association of Tower Erectors (NATE)

Full Remarks for OSHA's Dr. David Michaels' Video Greeting

NATE Conference on February 24-27, 2014

- Thank you for inviting me to join you for the 2014 NATE Conference and Exposition. While I can't be there in person, I applaud this opportunity for you to exchange ideas and experiences with your tower erection, service and maintenance colleagues across the country.
- Unfortunately, the timing of this meeting is significant. In 2013, more communication tower workers were killed than in the last two years combined. And in the first few weeks of 2014, we have already seen 4 more fatalities.
- We are very concerned about this sharp rise. The fatality rate in this industry is extremely high—and tower workers have a risk of fatal injury perhaps 25 to 30 times higher than the risk for the average American worker. This is clearly unacceptable.
- At OSHA, we are reaching out to educate industry and workers and providing free small businesses consultations. We've also increased our enforcement in this industry.
- Right now, we are investigating the recent tower collapse in West Virginia that killed two tower workers, as well as a firefighter who died while responding to the incident. Two other tower workers were hospitalized. We are still trying to figure out exactly what happened, but it is clear that something was not done properly.
- In too many tower collapse investigations, we find the collapse occurred as workers were replacing structural components or strengthening the tower to accommodate increased capacity. In some cases, too many diagonals are taken out without adequate bracing. In others, workers are not given clear directions about how to do the work and maintain structural integrity. Before starting a job involving replacing a structural component,

employers **must** develop and implement a plan to prevent collapse and ensure workers are safe.

- Most of the fatalities in this industry are due to falls, and we've found that many of the workers who are killed were wearing harnesses that were not tied off. Employers are responsible for training workers and ensuring that their tower crews are consistently protected. By reinforcing their own safety policies, training and re-training workers, and making sure subcontractors follow all safety rules, employers can create a culture of safety.
- Here's something we all know but is sometimes forgotten or ignored: Appropriately used fall protection saves lives. A few months ago, a worker was doing maintenance to an antenna at the top of a water tower in Virginia Beach. When his descent control device failed, the safety line connected to the D-ring on his harness stopped his fall and saved his life. This is the type of ending we all would prefer to see; one in which the worker goes home safely at the end of the day. We must make 100% tie-off the norm in this industry.
- Considering the tragic events of the last few months, we are extremely concerned that the 2013 upward trend will continue in 2014. As temperatures begin to rise, tower work will increase, and we cannot let that lead to more deaths. Every person in this industry needs to be vigilant to make sure workers are safe.
- Here are some of the recent steps OSHA has taken:
 - We've told our field staff to pay special attention to investigation of communication tower incidents. And while we are on site, our inspectors will collect more complete data about the job and what happened. This information will help OSHA to more fully understand and prevent these tragedies. Our inspectors will also be paying close attention to contracts and sub contracts to determine who is doing tower work and what their qualifications are. And we will be taking a hard look at the safety requirements that flow down through the

contracts and how owners and contractors ensure that everyone involved meets those requirements.

- We sent a letter to communication tower employers, urging them to join us in preventing these needless deaths. I appreciate NATE's help by sending this letter to your mailing list and posting it on your web page.
 - We published a new Fatal Facts bulletin about a fatality that resulted from a failed ladder safety device on a 400-foot telecommunications tower. This publication examines the likely causes of the fatality, as well as incident prevention
 - We've also launched a new communications tower web page—a “one stop shop” for all of our information, including where we've found violations and issued penalties.
 - Moving forward, we'll be issuing a revised communication tower directive, which is currently in the final stages of clearance. The directive tells our field staff how to enforce our standards when they inspect towers. The revised directive addresses safe access by hoist during all work activities, and expands the coverage to maintenance work.
 - We also plan to do more inspections at communication towers, and will ask our state partners to do the same.
- As you can see, this is something we are taking very seriously at OSHA. I sincerely hope that, together, we can turn this tide and get the message out that these tragedies should not be written off as the cost of doing business.

There is one way you can help us right now. If you have what you believe is particularly good contract language in terms of safety, or if you follow a process in which tower owners, contractors and subcontractors all work together to ensure no one is hurt – please

send the language, or a description of the process, or your best practices, to us. We want to make sure these best practices are spread throughout the industry. The email address to send these to is on our new communication towers web page.

- So, enjoy the conference, learn all you can, and please let your colleagues in the industry know: OSHA is concerned and we're taking action. We need everybody in the industry to do what they can to stop these senseless tragedies. You can rest assured that we will continue to do all we can to improve safety in this industry, even new regulations, if necessary.
- We appreciate your support in helping us to reverse this recent trend in tower deaths, and we look forward to continuing our work with NATE to reach out to the industry.
- Thank you.