Ontario Proposes New OHS Regulations for Rope Access Work

Rope access is a method that enables workers to perform work while accessing heights and hard-to-reach structures, buildings, geologic features, or spaces by using ropes as the primary means of support, work positioning, and fall prevention. Even though it’s extremely hazardous, Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, and Nova Scotia are currently the only provinces that specifically address rope access work in their Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) regulations. Ontario will soon become the fifth member of that group. The Ontario Ministry of Labour (MOL) recently ended public consultations on proposed regulations that, when finalized, will be the strictest in Canada. Here’s a briefing of what Ontario OHS coordinators need to know about the new regulations.

1. Current Ontario OHS Rope Access Work Requirements

As in most jurisdictions (Ontario doesn’t specifically address rope access in its OHS regulations. Such work is instead subject to general fall protection requirements which weren’t designed to deal with the unique aspects of rope access.

2. What the New OHS Rope Access Regulations Cover

The MOL proposal defines:

- **“Rope access”** as a technique by which access is gained to structures, geologic features, or locations where ropes are the primary means of support, work positioning, and fall prevention; and
- **“Rope access system”** as an assembly of ropes and components joined together so that there are two separately secured means of supporting the worker comprising of a working rope and a safety or back-up rope that are connected to the worker’s harness and each rope is independently secured to separate anchorage points.

3. Who the New OHS Rope Access Regulations Cover

The new rope access regulation will cover all employers and workplaces subject to the Ontario *OHS Act*, except when a rope access system is used by:

- An emergency responder performing rescue and other emergency services, or in training to perform such work, which could include police and fire fighters.
- A worker, such as an arborist, who climbs trees for purposes of pruning, repairing, or maintaining a tree or for tree removal.
- An instructor or guide for recreational climbing or mountaineering activities.
- A worker who’s a performer in the entertainment and advertising industry during a performance or rehearsal.

4. Minimum Age for Rope Access Workers

Workers would have to be at least 18 years of age to perform rope access work, which is in line with the minimum age in the Ontario OHS *Window Cleaning Regulation*.

5. Duty to Notify MOL of Rope Access Operation

Under the proposal, employers would have to electronically notify the MOL of a rope access operation at least 24 hours before the operation and provide the following information:

- Company name
- Contact number
- Name of on-site supervisor
- Location of work
- Date work commences
- Expected duration of the operation, and
- Number of workers who'll use a rope access system.

The employer would also have to notify the MOL of any changes to the above information.

6. Rope Access Work Training & Certification Requirements

Employers would have to ensure that workers and supervisors have Industrial Rope Access Trade Association (IRATA) or Society of Professional Rope Access Technicians (SPRAT) certification and training appropriate for the work. Although parts of the regulation are subject to variances, the training and certification requirements are set in stone.

7. Rope Access Supervision & Inspection Requirements

Every worker using a rope access system who’s suspended on the ropes must receive adequate supervision by a supervisor certified to IRATA Level 3 or SPRAT Level 3 (or SPRAT Level 2 in limited circumstances). A supervisor must inspect rope access system rigging for signs of wear, fatigue, or other damage before it’s put into use at a workplace for the first time; thereafter, the supervisor must inspect the system daily before a worker uses it, and before it’s used after any modifications. The employer must keep inspection records at the workplace and make them available to an MOL inspector upon request.

8. Rope Access Rescue Requirements

Before rope access work begins, the employer must have a competent person prepare written procedures for the emergency rescue of workers using a rope access system. The workers necessary to implement the on-site rescue procedures must be onsite. Rescue equipment must be installed before the work begins and inspected by the supervisor and a competent worker daily and in accordance with the manufacturer’s instructions.

9. Rope Access Hazard Assessment Requirements

The employer must also designate a competent person to conduct a risk assessment of the work to identify hazards that may arise from the use of each rope access system used at the workplace, with reference to the nature of the workplace, the type of work, and the conditions of work.

10. Rope Access Site-Specific Work Plan Requirements

There’s one other thing the employer must have a competent person do before rope access work begins, namely, prepare a written site-specific work plan that includes:

- The address of the workplace and a clear description of every distinct work area of the workplace to which the plan applies.
- The name and assigned duties of every worker who performs work in connection with the rope access operation.
- Measures and procedures to protect the health and safety of workers involved in the rope access operation.
- Measures to protect ropes from sharp edges, cutting, burning, and other damage.
- Measures to protect ropes, anchorages, anchorage connectors, and equipment from interference that could endanger the worker using the rope access system by machinery, equipment, or unauthorized persons that could endanger the worker using the rope access system.
- The rope access system to be used, including equipment and devices.
- The location of anchorages and anchorage connectors and how the rope access system is to be attached to the anchorages and anchorage connectors.
- The procedures for setting up and dismantling of the rope access system.
- The written emergency rescue procedures.
- The methods of ensuring clear and direct communication between workers involved in the rope access operation.

Before a worker begins installing or using a rope access system, the employer must ensure that workers have access to the site-specific work plan, the supervisor or employer reviews it with workers, and the workers acknowledge that they

reviewed the plan and are familiar with its contents. The employer must keep the plan at the site, ensure it’s implemented, and review it as often as necessary.

11. Rope Access System Design Requirements

A rope access system must:

- Have a working rope and safety/back-up rope connected to the worker’s full-body harness that are each separately secured to an independent anchorage point.
- Be made up of components that are adequate for their intended and actual use and compatible with each other and the environment in which they’re used.
- Limit the peak shock load when stopping the worker’s fall to not more than 6 kilonewtons (kN).
- Prevent a worker from striking a lower surface or object or swinging and striking a surface or object.

12. Rope Access System Component Requirements

Employers must ensure that no component of a rope access system is subjected to a load that may exceed its designed working load and that:

- Connectors are self-closing and self-locking and require at least two sequential actions to open.
- Descent control devices automatically stop descent and hold the worker in position when the worker removes their hand from the device.
- The working rope and safety/back-up rope:
- are the same diameter;
- are connected to separate anchorage connectors;
- are separately fixed or connected to the worker’s full-

body harness; and
- have a minimum breaking strength after terminations (i.e., knots) of 15 kN.

13. Rope Access Equipment Inspection

Rope access equipment and devices must be inspected before each use by a competent worker, and used, adjusted, maintained, inspected, and tested in accordance with the manufacturer’s instructions. Equipment and devices may not be used if defective or damaged, after being subjected to a shock load, or when the weather or other conditions make use likely to endanger a worker. A competent person must thoroughly examine rope access equipment before its first use and thereafter in accordance with the manufacturer’s instructions and no less than every six months.

14. Rope Access System Ropes Requirements

The rope in a rope access system must be independently/separately protected from sharp edges that could cut, chafe, or abrade other damage the rope. Each rope would also have to be protected from any damage from the work being performed.

15. Rope Access System Anchorage Requirements

Anchorages must be capable of withstanding any loads to which they may be subjected and anchorage connectors must be capable of supporting potential loads in all directions and have a minimum breaking strength of 15 kN.

16. Rope Access Fall Protection & PPE Requirements

A worker performing work in connection with a rope access operation and who’s exposed to the danger of falling more than three metres must be protected by a guardrail or method of fall protection. The worker must also have a climbing-style helmet with a chin strap that’s appropriate to protect against head injury and electrical hazards. The employer would have to ensure that equipment, devices, or tools at or about a rope access operation that could fall and endanger a person are tethered, and if necessary, other measures and procedures are implemented to protect any person from falling objects, which could include barricading areas where dropped objects could fall.

17. Rope Access Worker Personal Log Requirements

Workers who perform rope access work must keep a written personal log recording work experience and time. Supervisors must verify and sign off on the entries in the worker’s personal log. Workers have the right to take their logs with them when they change employers.

What Happens Next

Public consultations on the proposed regulations end on August 21, 2026. The MOL will review the comments and publish the final regulation along with the date it takes effect. Although it’s impossible to predict an effective date, when the MOL adopts an elaborate and technically challenging OHS regulation like this one, it typically gives employers a grace period of at least three to six months to comply.