

PPE Fit Testing for The Busy Season



Outdoor work accelerates across Canada once we see the light of Spring shining through our windows, and employers in construction, landscaping, forestry, utilities, agriculture, and other seasonal industries are currently preparing for their busiest months. Crews expand, new hires are onboarded, and projects ramp up quickly. Before productivity peaks, occupational health and safety (OHS) managers should prioritize one critical step: ensuring personal protective equipment (PPE) fit testing is completed and up to date.

Why Fit Testing Matters Before Busy Season

Respiratory protection is one of the most common PPE categories requiring formal fit testing. Workers in construction may encounter silica dust, wood dust, welding fumes, or asbestos during renovation work. Landscapers and agricultural workers may be exposed to pesticides, fertilizers, and organic dusts. Forestry crews may face wildfire smoke or chainsaw exhaust.

In many provinces, including under WorkSafeBC regulations, Ontario's Occupational Health and Safety Act and related regulations (such as those addressing designated substances), and Alberta's OHS Code, employers must ensure tight-fitting

respirators are properly fit tested before use.

During busy season, the risk of shortcuts increases. Crews are under pressure, and new or returning seasonal workers may not have current fit test records. Addressing fit testing early, especially before peak mobilization, prevents delays and reduces the risk of non-compliance.

When Fit Testing Is Required

Fit testing is required whenever a worker must wear a tight-fitting respirator, including:

- N95 or half-face respirators for silica or dust control.
- Elastomeric respirators for chemical exposure.
- Full-face respirators for higher-risk contaminants.

Fit testing must be completed:

- Before first use.
- Whenever a different make, model, or size of respirator is issued.
- If a worker experiences significant weight change.
- If there are facial changes that could affect the seal (e.g., dental work, scarring).
- At least annually, as required by many provincial standards.

Busy season hiring often introduces new workers who may never have been fit tested. OHS managers should incorporate fit testing into onboarding processes.

How to Prepare for Fit Testing

Preparation starts with reviewing your respiratory protection program. Confirm that:

- Hazard assessments clearly identify airborne risks.

- Appropriate respirator types have been selected.
- Medical evaluations (where required) are completed.
- Fit testing records are current and documented.

Employers may conduct qualitative fit testing (using taste or odour detection methods) or quantitative fit testing (using specialized instruments to measure leakage). The method chosen should align with regulatory requirements and the level of respiratory protection needed.

Scheduling fit testing sessions before the season ramps up avoids bottlenecks. Consider coordinating sessions across departments or multiple worksites to ensure all workers are covered.

Addressing Common Fit Issues

Improper fit is often caused by:

- Incorrect respirator size selection.
- Facial hair interfering with the seal.
- Improper donning techniques.

Workers must be clean-shaven where the respirator seals against the face. OHS managers should communicate this requirement clearly before testing dates.

Training is equally important. Workers need to understand how to perform user seal checks each time they wear a respirator and how to inspect equipment for damage.

Beyond Respirators: Seasonal PPE Checks

While respirators require formal fit testing, busy season preparation is also an opportunity to review other PPE:

- Ensure high-visibility garments meet CSA standards and

fit properly.

- Confirm hearing protection fits comfortably and consistently.
- Check fall protection harness sizing for new or returning workers.
- Verify protective gloves are task-appropriate and properly sized.

Ill-fitting PPE can reduce protection and discourage consistent use.

Building a Proactive Safety Culture

Completing PPE fit testing before the busy season demonstrates due diligence and reinforces a prevention-focused culture. It ensures workers are protected from day one of peak operations and reduces the likelihood of last-minute compliance gaps.

As construction projects break ground and outdoor industries mobilize across Canada, proactive fit testing helps ensure that respiratory protection and overall PPE effectiveness keeps pace with rising workloads. In a season defined by growth and momentum, safety preparation must come first.