Why Noise Is Back on the Safety Agenda What the New Noise Exposure Proposals Mean for Canadian Workplaces

For years, noise was treated as a familiar occupational hazard. Many workplaces had done the audits, handed out the earmuffs, posted the signs and felt confident they were doing enough. Hearing conservation programs often ran quietly in the background of broader OHS efforts. Compared to more dramatic hazards like machinery, falls, confined spaces or chemical exposures, noise felt routine, almost predictable.

Now it is back on the radar at the federal level, and louder than before.

The federal government has proposed updated occupational noise exposure limits under the Canada Labour Code, and the change reflects something that safety researchers and compensation boards have been saying for a decade. Noise exposure has not gone away. It has evolved. It has diversified. And its long-term consequences are showing up in places many employers were not expecting.

Hearing loss is no longer viewed only as an industrial problem. It is a transportation problem, an aviation problem, a warehouse problem, a telecommunications problem and increasingly a problem for workers who were never

considered high risk. Noise today looks different and behaves differently, and the federal government is signaling that the old limits were not keeping pace with the science.

This article explores why noise is gaining new federal attention, what the proposed limits mean in practical terms and how OHS managers can prepare their workplaces for an era where hearing protection must be more than a compliance task.

The Numbers Tell a Story That Is Hard to Ignore

Hearing loss remains one of the most frequently compensated occupational diseases in Canada. WSIB data from Ontario consistently shows thousands of noise-induced hearing loss claims every year, and Alberta's WCB has reported steady increases in accepted claims linked to long-term exposure. Statistics Canada has also found that nearly 40 percent of working-age adults report some degree of hearing difficulty, with noise exposure at work identified as a major contributing factor.

These numbers sit in contrast to the perception many employers still have that noise is under control. When federal inspectors conducted reviews of high-noise workplaces, they found that although hearing protection was provided, large gaps existed in fit, consistency, maintenance and monitoring. In several transportation and logistics operations, workers were wearing hearing protection that reduced noise only slightly because the devices were old, dirty or improperly inserted. In an aviation support facility, ground crew wore hearing protection over hats and hoods, reducing effectiveness to almost nothing.

Noise risk did not disappear. The sense of urgency did.

The proposed federal changes aim to correct this by grounding

expectations in the latest research on cumulative exposure, impulse noise, tinnitus risk and the link between noise and overall cognitive fatigue.

A Story from an Unexpected Workplace

One of the most striking recent cases of occupational hearing loss came from a federally regulated call center. Not a mine. Not an airport. Not a factory.

A worker developed tinnitus and measurable hearing damage after repeated exposure to intermittent audio spikes in her headset. Software updates had created a glitch that caused sudden bursts of high-volume noise. She reported it several times, but the issue was dismissed as an IT problem rather than a health risk.

By the time the employer took it seriously, the damage was permanent.

Investigators later noted that the employer relied heavily on the belief that only traditional industrial environments faced hearing loss concerns. The case became a landmark reminder that noise exposure can occur in places that do not look noisy at all. The proposed federal limits are designed for a world where both impulse noise and intermittent spikes carry serious risk.

Noise is no longer just about steady decibel levels. It is about sudden impacts, unpredictable surges and environments where noise interacts with technology in ways that create hidden hazards.

The Science Behind the Push for

Lower Limits

For years, the federal standard allowed exposure to 87 dBA over an eight-hour day. The proposed limit lowers that to 85 dBA, bringing Canada closer to the best practices used in many international jurisdictions.

The difference between 87 and 85 may look small on paper. In reality, it represents a significant reduction in allowable exposure because decibels do not increase linearly. Every increase of three decibels represents a doubling of sound energy. Moving to 85 dBA reduces cumulative damage and provides stronger protection for workers who experience fluctuating or intermittent noise.

Research from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health shows that even moderate noise can impair concentration, elevate stress hormones and contribute to long-term cardiovascular strain. Noise harms hearing, but it also harms cognitive performance and fatigue levels. Investigators for marine and rail operations have linked fatigue-related errors partly to chronic noise environments that workers had grown so accustomed to they no longer noticed them.

Noise dulls more than hearing. It dulls awareness.

The proposed limits recognize that chronic exposure at the old threshold was contributing to preventable injuries.

Noise Is Also Becoming a Psychological Hazard

One surprising trend in federal workplaces is the rise of noise as a mental health issue. Workers in shared office environments report experiencing irritability, stress and headaches linked to constant low-level noise. Postal workers report difficulty concentrating inside sorting centers where

mechanical equipment creates rhythmic noise that disrupts focus. Transportation workers report “cognitive fog” during long shifts due to continuous background noise in vehicles.

During a federal investigation into a marine terminal incident, a worker described feeling “numb” after hours of constant engine noise. He said it made him feel disconnected and exhausted, and that he missed a critical signal from a coworker because his brain had stopped processing the background audio.

This is the side of noise that often goes unnoticed. Hearing loss is not just a physical impairment. Noise affects mental clarity, emotional regulation and the ability to interpret sound cues that matter during safety critical tasks.

The proposed changes reflect this growing understanding that noise is not simply a matter of protecting ears. It is a matter of protecting minds, focus and safety decision-making.

The Consequences of Complacency

Noise is comfortable. It is familiar. Many workplaces accept it as part of the job. Workers often joke about “getting used to it.” Unfortunately, the human ear never gets used to noise. It only gets damaged by it.

One federal rail worker shared a story about losing his ability to hear his grandchildren clearly. He had spent his entire career working around engines and couplers. He wore hearing protection most days, but not consistently. He admitted that when he was younger he did not think much about it. He thought hearing loss was something that happened to other people.

By the time he retired, he struggled to follow conversations in crowded rooms. He said the hardest part was feeling like he had lost a part of his connection to the world.

Noise is deceptive because the harm accumulates slowly. The moment of exposure is not the moment of damage. The damage reveals itself years later.

This is why federal regulators are bringing noise back to the front of the OHS conversation. Too many workers are paying the price long after the exposure occurred.

What the Proposed Limits Mean for Workplaces

The move toward 85 dBA as the new federal exposure limit will require employers to evaluate noise environments more thoroughly and more regularly. Many workplaces will need updated noise surveys, better tracking of exposure times, and more consistent integration of engineering controls.

Hearing protection programs will also face closer scrutiny. Regulators will expect not only the presence of PPE but proof that it is fitted, maintained and actually used. Fit testing will likely become more prominent. So will education on the limitations of hearing protection and the need for combined controls.

Workplaces with impulse or impact noise, such as baggage handling, rail yards or postal equipment hubs, will need stronger mitigation strategies because impulse noise may exceed safe limits even if the average daily exposure does not.

For many employers, the biggest change will not be technical. It will be cultural. Noise will need to be treated with the same seriousness as chemical exposure or fall hazards. Workers will need to be re-engaged in hearing conservation programs that have grown stale. Supervisors will need new communication tools to reinforce expectations.

The shift is not only regulatory. It is philosophical. It

recognizes that hearing is part of quality of life and part of daily safety performance.

A Final Moment That Brings the Issue Home

During a federal consultation session held in Ottawa, an OHS advisor from a large transportation company spoke about a worker who had once told him, “I did not notice the noise until the silence came.” The worker had recently been fitted for hearing aids after years of noise exposure. When he put them in for the first time, he started to cry. He realized he had forgotten how clearly the world was supposed to sound.

That moment has stayed with the advisor for years. He said it changed the way he approached noise on the job. It made him understand that hearing loss is not an inconvenience. It is a form of isolation.

The proposed federal noise limits are not just about compliance. They are about preventing thousands of similar stories from becoming part of Canada’s occupational health history.

Noise is coming back to the center of the conversation. And Canadian workplaces will be stronger, safer and more humane when they treat it as the serious hazard it has always been.