

WorkSafe consulting staff over job cuts

Heidi Bendikson - Fri, 22 Sep 2023

WorkSafe's chief executive is stepping down as the Crown agency looks to cut more than 100 jobs.

The workplace health and safety regulator said yesterday that it is consulting with staff on disestablishing between 100 and 120 roles – but it says frontline inspector and investigator roles will not be affected.

The announcement coincided with WorkSafe chair Jennifer Kerr saying chief executive Phil Parkes had decided to step down, but will continue in his role until the end of the year to see through the change process.

He has been in the role for three years.

The cuts had been indicated in August, with Radio NZ reporting at the time that senior staff had been told they needed to manage costs due to a multimillion-dollar deficit.

However, WorkSafe says in a statement that their purpose is to align with recommendations from a strategic baseline report commissioned by the agency in 2021.

"This requires us to streamline our activities and refocus on our core functions."

Frontline

MinEx chief executive Wayne Scott says it has consistently appealed to the Government to adequately fund WorkSafe, particularly the inspectorate, and to consider alternative funding models that may include industry funding.

He says it is impossible for the six current high hazard inspectors to adequately regulate the 100 mines, eight tunnelling projects and 950 quarries spread across the country.

"Such low resourcing for WorkSafe's High Hazards Unit means any one of New Zealand's 1000-plus operating extractives sites may only be visited once every several years."

WorkSafe currently has about 767 staff, of which 213 are inspectors.

According to a briefing to the incoming minister for Workplace Relations in June, WorkSafe had been working to rebuild its inspector ratio back to 2013 levels – of 8.4 inspectors per 100,000 workers – over the next three years.

The ratio currently sits at 6.3 inspectors per 100,000 workers.

The statement announcing the proposed restructure says that WorkSafe still intends to grow inspector numbers over the coming years, with more inspectors planned for later this year.

Reaction

Public Service Association national secretary Kerry Davies says the union is disappointed by the redundancies and that they will result in a significant loss of technical expertise.

"Every worker has the right to a job that does not hurt or kill them.

"We need to ensure that WorkSafe has the tools and resources to keep workers safe and the PSA will be advocating strongly for WorkSafe to get the resources it needs to be effective."

She added that the protection of workers required further investment.

Those sentiments were echoed by the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions.

"More funding is needed right now to ensure WorkSafe's valuable mahi can continue to help ensure working New Zealanders can return home safe and healthy from work," NZCTU president Richard Wagstaff says.

Baseline report

An independent strategic baseline [review](#) of WorkSafe released in 2022 found that, while the agency did not have any significant issues, it lacked a clear description of what it does or how its core activities are linked to outcomes.

"Although at least two previous reviews identified the need to cost and evaluate regulatory activities to inform resource allocation decisions, these recommendations do not appear to have been implemented," the report says.

The report also noted a lack of agreement over roles and responsibilities of government transport-related agencies and suggests that WorkSafe target the issue of fatigue in the road freight transport industry with urgency.

