

What To Do If You Find an Area With Missing Sprinklers

By Henry Fontana

As someone who spent many years doing sprinkler inspections and now teaching NFPA 25 classes, one of the most common questions I hear is, "When I am walking around the property, what do I do if I find an area missing sprinklers?"

The problem with this scenario is, we as inspectors are not engineers and are not privy to the construction documents. How do we know if the property received a variance for the area with no sprinklers? Maybe it's not required per code? We are there with an inspection checklist and we are to look for things like leaking fittings or sprinklers, loaded sprinklers, corroded sprinklers, and sprinklers that might have no liquid in the glass bulb. We do all this from the floor level.

NFPA 2016 Annual Sprinkler Inspection Questions:

- **Sprinklers (visible)**
- **No damage or leaks**
- **Free of corrosion, foreign material, or paint**
- **Installed in proper orientation**
- **Fluid in glass bulbs**
- **Spare sprinklers — proper number and type, including installation wrench**
- **Loading — sprinklers are free of dust**
- **Escutcheons/cover plates are present and installed correctly**
- **Minimum clearance between sprinklers and storage**

If we write up a missing sprinkler on an inspection report, we now have placed liability on ourselves. In the unfortunate event that there is a fire or an activation of a sprinkler and our report is used in a legal matter, we will be questioned what made us (the inspector) make the determination that the sprinkler was required. Even worse, let's say we write up a missing sprinkler in closet one but a fire breaks out in closet two that is also missing a sprinkler but we did not make that note on our report, we will now be questioned by a legal team on why we did not call out all the areas.

These reasons, and many more, are examples of why we are not required to call out missing sprinklers. You could walk into

a five-story office building and find ONE sprinkler. You look at this sprinkler from the ground level and determine that it's not leaking, not corroded, it's in the proper orientation, with fluid in its bulb. You would then be able to write a clean report and pass that inspection.

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Now, let's get to what we can actually do.

As fire protection professionals and NICET-certified professionals, we have a Code of Ethics. The portion from NICET reads, "Have due regard for the physical environment and for public safety, health, and wellbeing. If their judgment is overruled under

circumstances where the safety, health, property, or welfare of the public may be endangered, they shall notify their employer, client, and such other authority as may be appropriate. An employee shall initially express those concerns to the employer."

What does this mean? I always suggest to my inspectors to have a "page 2" on their inspection report. This page is just a suggestion page. On here, we can inform our customer that during the inspection we noticed many areas that were not protected by sprinkler coverage. We suggest that they hire us to come and do an evaluation of their building and determine if sprinkler coverage is required in these areas. You have just notified your customer of a potential issue in their life safety system and put the liability back on the owner.

In summary, NFPA 25 does not require contractors to look for missing sprinklers; that is the owner's responsibility. NFPA 25 is predicated on the assumption that sprinkler systems are designed, installed, and inspected properly, all in accordance with NFPA 13, *Standard for the Installation of Sprinkler Systems*. If the system isn't correct initially, NFPA 25 has little directly to do with fixing it. Essentially, the inspection, testing, and maintenance contractor is not required to look for missing sprinklers or other changes that would affect the sprinkler system in a fire condition.

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