

Confined Spaces Safety

The Risk

Wood pelleting facilities contain spaces that are considered to be “confined” because their configurations hinder the activities of employees who must enter into, work in or exit from them. In many instances, employees who work in confined spaces also face increased risk of exposure to serious physical injury from hazards such as entrapment, engulfment, and hazardous atmospheric conditions. Confinement itself may pose entrapment hazards and work in confined spaces may keep employees closer to hazards such as machinery components than they would be otherwise. For example, confinement, limited access, and restricted airflow can result in hazardous conditions that would not normally arise in an open workplace.

By definition, a confined space:

- Is large enough for an employee to enter fully and perform assigned work;
- Is not designed for continuous occupancy by the employee; and
- Has a limited or restricted means of entry or exit. These spaces may include underground vaults, tanks, storage bins, pits and diked areas, vessels, silos and other similar areas.

By definition, a permit-required confined space has one or more of these characteristics:

- Contains or has the potential to contain a hazardous atmosphere;
- Contains a material with the potential to engulf someone who enters the space;
- Has an internal configuration that might cause an entrant to be trapped or asphyxiated by inwardly converging walls or by a 3 floor that slopes downward and tapers to a smaller cross section; and/or
- Contains any other recognized serious safety or health hazards.

The Controls

OSHA Confined Spaces Requirements

OSHA’s standard for confined spaces (29 CFR 1910.146) contains the requirements for practices and procedures to protect employees in general industry from the hazards of entering permit spaces. Any employer who allows employee entry into a permit space must develop and implement a written program for the space.

Among other things, the OSHA standard requires the employer's written program to:

- Implement necessary measures to prevent unauthorized entry;
- Identify and evaluate permit space hazards before allowing employee entry;
- Test atmospheric conditions in the permit space before entry operations and monitor the space during entry;
- Perform appropriate testing for the following atmospheric hazards in this sequence: oxygen, combustible gases or vapors, and toxic gases or vapors;
- Establish and implement the means, procedures and practices to eliminate or control hazards necessary for safe permit space entry operations;
- Identify employee job duties;
- Provide and maintain, at no cost to the employee, personal protective equipment and any other equipment necessary for safe entry and require employees to use it;
- Ensure that at least one attendant is stationed outside the permit space for the duration of entry operations;
- Coordinate entry operations when employees of more than one employer are working in the permit space;
- Implement appropriate procedures for summoning rescue and emergency services, and preventing unauthorized personnel from attempting rescue;
- Establish, in writing, and implement a system for the preparation, issue, use and cancellation of entry permits;
- Review established entry operations annually and revise the permit space entry program as necessary; and
- Implement the procedures that any attendant who is required to monitor multiple spaces will follow during an emergency in one or more of those spaces.

The employer's written program should establish the means, procedures and practices to eliminate or control hazards necessary for safe permit space entry operations. These may include:

- Specifying acceptable entry conditions;
- Isolating the permit space;
- Providing barriers;
- Verifying acceptable entry conditions; and
- Purging, making inert, flushing or ventilating the permit space

In addition to personal protective equipment, other equipment that employees may require for safe entry into a permit space includes:

- Testing, monitoring, ventilating, communications and lighting equipment;
- Barriers and shields;
- Ladders; and
- Retrieval devices.

If hazardous conditions are detected during entry, employees must immediately leave the space. The employer must evaluate the space to determine the cause of the hazardous atmosphere and modify the program as necessary.

A space with no potential to have atmospheric hazards may be classified as a non-permit confined space only when all hazards are eliminated in accordance with the standard. If entry is required to eliminate hazards and obtain data, the employer must follow specific procedures in the standard.

A permit, signed by the entry supervisor, must be posted at all entrances or otherwise made available to entrants before they enter a permit space. The permit must verify that pre-entry preparations outlined in the standard have been completed. The duration of entry permits must not exceed the time required to complete an assignment. Entry permits must include:

- Name of permit space to be entered, authorized entrant(s), eligible attendants and individuals authorized to be entry supervisors;
- Test results;
- Tester's initials or signature;
- Name and signature of supervisor who authorizes entry;
- Purpose of entry and known space hazards;
- Measures to be taken to isolate permit spaces and to eliminate or control space hazards;
- Name and telephone numbers of rescue and emergency services and means to be used to contact them;
- Date and authorized duration of entry;
- Acceptable entry conditions;
- Communication procedures and equipment to maintain contact during entry;
- Additional permits, such as for hot work, that have been issued authorizing work in the permit space;
- Special equipment and procedures, including personal protective equipment and alarm systems; and
- Any other information needed to ensure employee safety.

The entry supervisor must cancel entry permits when an assignment is completed or when new conditions exist. New conditions must be noted on the canceled permit and used in revising the permit space program. The standard requires that the employer keep all canceled entry permits for at least one year.

Industry Learnings

Wood dust and confined spaces can bring unique safety challenges. These challenges require a heightened awareness to wood dust, carbon monoxide, and other exposures that can interact, leading to a hazardous condition.

As an example, a worker opened a pellet cooler during an outage and was initialing the confined space permit process when high carbon monoxide readings were noted. The worker was going to ventilate the cooler with forced air from a portable ventilation fan designed for confined space work. The forced air would have created a dust cloud as it blew fresh air into and through the cooler. The co-worker noticed that directly below the catwalk “hot work” was underway. If a dust cloud had been created when the fan was utilized it could have created an opportunity for a dust fire or explosion.

Always remember to establish safe zones during confined space work and consider how other work coincides with the confined space (i.e. LOTO, Hot Work, etc...).

Disclaimer

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