

INDUSTRY ALERT

CRITICAL INJURY

Worker found unconscious in trailer from carbon monoxide poisoning

What happened?

When a forwarder operator for a logging company did not report for the start of his shift, a co-worker went to the forwarder operator's privately owned trailer to check on him. After trying and failing to wake up the forwarder operator, the co-worker called for help to remove him from the trailer. An ambulance was called and the worker was transported to hospital. Testing of the interior of the trailer with an explosive-gas detector ruled out propane poisoning as a cause of the forwarder operator's injury, but high levels of carbon monoxide were detected. The hospital subsequently confirmed carbon monoxide poisoning. The worker was later transferred to another medical facility for further treatment.

Why did it happen?

Investigation of all the equipment in the trailer eventually pinpointed a faulty refrigerator as the cause of the carbon monoxide build-up. Insufficient clearances at the refrigerator's intake vent did not permit enough fresh air intake, resulting in poor combustion. The trailer was equipped with a carbon monoxide detector but there was no battery in it. There was also a safety shutoff which would have automatically shut down the refrigerator as soon as excessive amounts of carbon monoxide were detected, but the safety shutoff was not connected to the refrigerator.

How can it be prevented?

All too often, critical injuries and even fatalities occur because hazard controls that have been put in place to prevent such incidents are not used properly. In this case, the carbon monoxide detector and safety shutoff in the trailer would have automatically alerted the occupant of the trailer to the hazard IF the carbon monoxide detector had been equipped with a battery and IF the safety shutoff had been connected to the refrigerator.

Carbon monoxide (CO) is an odorless, tasteless, toxic gas found in combustion fumes. It's an especially dangerous substance because it provides no noticeable warning as it accumulates to dangerous levels. The most common symptoms of over-exposure are headache, dizziness, weakness, nausea and confusion. Increasing levels of exposure can produce loss of consciousness or death. A person who is asleep can die of carbon monoxide poisoning before he or she experiences symptoms of any kind.

After this incident, the company ordered an assessment by a certified technician to verify that all the equipment in the trailer was in good working order. Such assessments should be done on a regular basis on all woodlands facilities, especially equipment that's powered by combustion. Carbon monoxide detectors and appliance safety shutoffs should also be checked regularly to ensure that they can do what they are designed to do.

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