

SAFETY

OSHA Issues Third Largest Fine in History Following Sugar Refinery Explosion

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has issued citations proposing penalties totaling \$8,777,500 against the Imperial Sugar Co. and its two affiliates alleging violations at their plants in Port Wentworth, Georgia, and Gramercy, Louisiana.

OSHA initiated the inspections following an explosion and fire on February 7, 2008, at the Port Wentworth refinery that claimed the lives of 13 employees and hospitalized 40 others. Three employees still remain hospitalized. The proposed penalties against Imperial Sugar represent the third largest fine in the history of OSHA.

OSHA's inspections of both facilities found that there were large accumulations of combustible sugar dust in workrooms, on electrical motors and on other equipment. The investigation also determined that officials at the company were well aware of these conditions, but they took no action reasonably directed at reducing the obvious hazards.

"I am outraged that this company would show a complete disregard for its employees' safety by knowingly

placing them in an extremely dangerous work environment," said Assistant Secretary of Labor for Occupational Safety and Health Edwin G. Foulke Jr. He added, "What is even worse is that a month after the devastating catastrophe in Port Wentworth that claimed the lives of 13 people, this company had done little to ensure abatement of the combustible dust hazards at its other plant. If OSHA investigators had not inspected and posted an imminent danger notice regarding areas at the second plant, the same thing could have happened again."

OSHA proposed \$5,062,000 in penalties for safety violations at the Port Wentworth refinery and \$3,715,500 for safety violations found at the Gramercy refinery. The citations include 108 instances of willful violations related to the combustible dust hazard, including the failure to clean up dust and not using appropriate equipment or safeguards where combustible dust is present. OSHA also has issued 10 citations for other willful violations, 100 citations for serious violations and four citations for other-than-serious safety and health violations.

The company has 15 business days to contest the citations and proposed penalties before the independent Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission. OSHA's Savannah, Georgia, area office staff inspected the Port Wentworth site, while the agency's Baton Rouge, Louisiana, area office staff inspected the Gramercy, Louisiana, location.



Reducing Work-Related Accidents and Illness Through Better Risk Assessment

Every year 5,720 people die in the European Union as a consequence of work-related accidents, according to EU-ROSTAT figures. Besides that, the International Labor Organization estimates that an additional 159,500 workers in the EU die every year from occupational diseases. Taking both figures into consideration, it is estimated that every three-and-a-half minutes somebody in the EU dies from work-related causes.

Most of these accidents and diseases are preventable, and the first step in preventing them is risk assessment. That is the message of “Healthy Workplaces. Good for you. Good for business,” the Europe-wide information campaign on risk assessment, launched by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). The campaign focuses especially on high-risk sectors such as construction, healthcare, and agriculture, and on the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises. It will run over two years (2008-09).

Under EU law, all employers in the EU are required to carry out risk assessments. Risk assessment helps employers understand the action they need to take to improve workplace health and safety.

“Every occupational accident and disease is one too many,” says Vladimír Špidla, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. “Even if they don’t result in fatalities, the consequences are unacceptable, both for the people concerned and for the economy. Every year, million of workers in the EU are involved in accidents which force them to stay at home for at least three working

days at an enormous cost to the economy. Risk assessment is the key to reducing these figures. But it can only be the first step—implementation must follow.”

The Healthy Workplaces campaign highlights the necessity for risk assessment in line with the Community Strategy for Health and Safety at Work (2007–2012), which aims to cut work-related accidents over this period by a quarter across the EU.

According to EU-OSHA Director Jukka Takala, “With the Healthy Workplaces campaign we want to encourage enterprises to carry out risk assessment properly, involving everyone in the workplace. We want to promote good practice that can be adapted to other workplaces.”

Takala also highlights the key messages of the campaign: “First, risk assessment is not necessarily complicated, bureaucratic, or a task only for experts. This is a mistaken belief that is particularly common among SMEs. But there are plenty of tools available (such as checklists) that help in the process, and EU-OSHA promotes a simple five-step approach. Secondly, proper risk assessment also brings a number of business benefits, because making workplaces safer and healthier helps to reduce absenteeism and insurance costs, and increases worker motivation and productivity.”

“Risk assessment ultimately also helps to reduce the burden on national health care systems,” said Romana Tomc, Slovenian State Secretary of Labor, Family and Social Affairs. The present and upcoming EU presidencies and the EU social partners all strongly support the campaign, as do the focal points—usually the national occupational safety and health authorities—in all 27 Member States. “This shows that occupational safety and health at work is a key issue for the European social model,” she adds. ■