

WORK IN CONFINED SPACES

SUMMARY

1. This paper continues the discussion on confined spaces begun at the 44th SSHSCC and updates members on some recent developments.

BACKGROUND

2. Paper 44/A provided details of the Glomar Artic incident and the findings of the resulting fatal accident inquiry. The circumstances of the incident and the concerns identified by the inquiry were discussed at the 44th and the 45th meetings. Paper 46/D continued the discussion by outlining the recommendations made by the Sheriff who sat on the inquiry and by introducing an early draft of a possible self-audit tool. At the 46th meeting there was insufficient time to discuss the audit tool.

3. Since the 46th meeting there has been 4 confined space fatalities involving industries/processes covered by the Engineering and Utilities Sector. They include a double fatality involving shipyard employees, a single fatality involving a contractor working in a boatyard and a single fatality involving a welder working in a premise out with the Sector. Brief details of the fatalities are contained in paper 47/F and in a press release issued alerting employers to the dangers of confined space work, attached as appendix 1.

4. Paper 45/B provided details of an incident involving 2 contractors working in a shipyard becoming overcome by carbon monoxide fumes when using a petrol powered road cutter in a tented enclosure. The Sector has been made aware of 5 fatalities in the last 18 months involving petrol powered equipment being used in confined spaces. 3 of these deaths were due to petrol-powered generators and one of the incidents involved a double fatality.

ACTION

5. Members are asked to

- note the contents of the attached press release and the need for constant vigilance with regards to confined space work;
- outline any additional action that they have taken with regards to confined space work since the 46th meeting; and
- note the contents of the draft self-audit tool for confined space work and to discuss their thoughts at the 47th meeting on the value of such a tool and ways in which it can be improved.

APPENDIX 1

HSE ALERTS EMPLOYERS TO THE DANGERS OF CONFINED SPACES FOLLOWING FOUR DEATHS IN FOUR WEEKS

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has reminded all employers who may encounter confined spaces of the dangers involved, following four tragic deaths in four weeks. These deaths follow a series of other confined space incidents in recent months. Three of the deaths, which occurred in two separate incidents all involved an oxygen deficient atmosphere. The other death involved the use of a highly flammable liquid.

HSE inspector Graham Watson commented:

"It is believed the fatalities occurred soon after entering the confined spaces. This serves to emphasise that the dangers of confined spaces can be lethal no matter how brief the entry is expected to be."

The low oxygen levels have been attributed separately to the process of rust formation within a previously sealed vessel, and the use of an inert gas in a welding process. As well as considering other possible causes of an oxygen deficient atmosphere, employers must also consider all the other hazards associated with confined spaces, including:

- flammable substances and oxygen enrichment;
- toxic gases, fumes or vapour;
- the danger that people could be harmed by liquids getting into the space; and
- the flow of solid materials such as grain.

Other recent confined space incidents have included: two employees of a construction firm being overcome by carbon monoxide fumes when using a petrol powered road cutter in a tented enclosure; and two painters being overcome by paint fumes when applying a solvent-based paint by brush in a confined space.

Graham Watson added:

"Recent incidents highlight the need to fully consider the impact that any work within a confined space may have on the atmosphere within that the space and the resulting risks to health and safety."

Under the Confined Spaces Regulations 1997 employers must first try to avoid the need to enter a confined space. Where this is not possible, they must:

- carry out an assessment of the risks associated with entering a confined space and draw up a safe system of work;
- limit entry to the confined space to employees who are competent for confined space work and who have received suitable training;

- verify, prior to entry, that the atmosphere in the confined space is safe to breathe;
provide any necessary ventilation; and
- make sure suitable rescue arrangements are in place before anyone goes in to the confined space. These rescue arrangements should not involve risks to the safety of the people intended to carry out the rescue.

Notes to Editors

1. Guidance on the asphyxiation hazards in welding and allied processes is available on the HSE website at: http://www.hse.gov.uk/fod/infodocs/288_6R.pdf For further guidance on confined spaces see Safe work in confined spaces – Confined Spaces Regulations 1997 – Approved Code of Practice, Regulations and Guidance L101 ISBN 0-7176-1405-0 available from HSE Books.

PUBLIC ENQUIRIES: Call HSE's InfoLine, tel: 08701 545500, or write to: HSE Information Services, Caerphilly Business Park, Caerphilly CF83 3GG.

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