Electric & Autonomous Vehicles on Site: New Risks, New Rules Fatality File

US Department of Labor finds electric vehicle battery maker again exposes workers to serious health hazards after investigation of Commerce fire

What Happened

In October 2023, a lithium battery fire broke out at the SK Battery America Inc. manufacturing plant in Commerce, Georgia – a global EV battery supplier. Multiple workers suffered potentially permanent respiratory damage after being exposed to the toxic atmosphere produced by the fire, including hydrofluoric acid vapors released during the lithium battery event. OSHA opened an investigation and found the company had failed to train workers on how to protect themselves in the toxic atmosphere a lithium battery fire generates, and had not established a complete emergency response plan for that specific hazard. This was not the first time. OSHA had already cited SK Battery in December 2023 for exposing workers to cobalt, nickel, and total dust above permissible exposure limits – and again in January 2024 for hazards associated with the company's energy control program.

What Went Wrong

OSHA cited SK Battery for five serious violations after finding the company failed to establish a complete emergency response plan, exposed workers to inhalation hazards including hydrofluoric acid vapors produced in lithium battery fires, and failed to train employees on how to protect themselves adequately. The hazards of lithium battery fires – thermal runaway, toxic off-gassing, and

re-ignition — are documented and known. What was missing was a workplace system to translate that knowledge into worker training and emergency preparedness before the fire happened.

The Bottom Line

"On multiple occasions in less than a year, we have found SK Battery America failing in their responsibility to meet required federal standards designed to help every worker end their shift safely," said OSHA Area Office Director Joshua Turner. Electric vehicle technology is advancing faster than the safety systems designed to protect the workers who build and maintain it. A lithium battery fire is not the same as a conventional fire — and workers cannot protect themselves from a hazard they have never been trained to recognize or respond to.

Source: https://www.osha.gov/news