Fire Kills Worker Assigned As Lookout

At a sawmill, a fire broke out. It had originated in the vacuum system which picks up sawdust from the various woodworking machines and carries it to a large silo outside the building. Firefighters put out this fire. Then two workers were instructed to watch the silo for any sign of fire in the system.

The two workers entered the silo because the weather was cold outside. Once inside, they found a smoldering rag in one of the intake ducts within the silo. One worker knocked down the rag and an explosion resulted. That worker was overcome by smoke and fire and he died of burns and carbon monoxide poisoning. The second worker escaped.

No one should enter such a silo – or any confined space – without using the correct equipment and procedures. The proper respiratory protective gear, escape equipment, an emergency plan and correct confined space procedures including a properly-equipped lookout stationed outside are required. These precautions would be needed even without the danger of fire.

Enclosed spaces present the risks of lack of oxygen, toxic gases, engulfment and entrapment as well as fire. The coroner investigating this case also recommended that a fixed ladder be installed in the silo for emergency escape.

Remember, never enter a confined space unless you are authorized and qualified to do so, and only then by following the correct procedures and using the right equipment. Never underestimate the explosive potential of dusts and powders such as sawdust.