Fire Watch General Safety Meeting Kit

OSHA mandates the presence of both hole and fire watch personnel in the Code of Federal Regulations. Fire watch personnel provide surveillance of areas where ¨hot work¨, such as welding or cutting with torches, is occurring. Fire watch workers may be part of a welding team that make sure that smoldering fires result from cutting or welding metal. They are vital part of construction and industrial maintenance safety programs.

The main job for fire watch personnel is to sound the alarm if there is an emergency so that firefighters can be brought in. They may attempt to control the fire but their primary role is not fight the flames, but to simply alert professionals so that they can come in take care of it.

Fire Watch Responsibilities Include:

- Constantly patrolling areas where ¨hot work¨ is being performed, maintaining vigilance of potential fires.
- Being familiar with facilities and procedures for sounding an alarm in the event of a fire and having a means of notifying emergency services.
- Having fire-extinguishing equipment readily available and being well-trained in its use.
- Maintaining the conditions and requirements stated on the safety permit.
- Inspecting the entire work area to look for potential release of flammable vapors or liquids before, during, and at the end of each shift.
- Being prepared to operate fire extinguishers, hydrants, fixed monitors, and hose carts anytime.
- Fire watchers are required to be familiar with facilities for sounding an alarm in the event of a fire.
- Fire watchers should refrain from all other job duties.
- According to the NFPA 51B standard, fire watchers must remain on the scene for 60 minutes after work is complete.

The fire watch may need to stay on-site longer, depending on the conditions of the worksite.

When is a Fire Watch Needed?

A fire watch is usually required for one of four reasons:

- The building´s fire alarm, fire sprinkler, or fire suppression system is out of order or an outage is preplanned for a period to exceed four hours. The fire marshal often requires notification for conditions like these.
- Hot work is occurring in the building. Hot work includes welding, using a torch, or other spark or flame producing work. Many building fires have been ignited by activities considered hot work.
- During demolition of a building during certain hazardous activities similar to hot work.
- Dense crowds in a building requiring extra precautions. Some public assembly buildings are required to conduct fire watches during events for extra crowd protection.

HOW IS A FIRE WATCH CONDUCTED?

A fire watch consists of one or more qualified persons performing these functions:

- Keeping diligent watch for fires.
- Preventing fire ignition sources.
- Ensuring adequate means of egress and removing obstructions to egress as necessary.
- Promptly remediating hazards that are found.

BASIC REQUIREMENTS FOR FIRE WATCHES

According to the NFPA, for fire alarm systems, a fire watch is required if the system is impaired for more than four hours in a 24-hour period. For water-based fire protection systems, fire watches are required for impairments lasting 10 hours or more in a 24-hour period. In both cases, the fire department must be

notified.

A common misconception with the fire watch requirements is that systems must be out of service for more than four consecutive hours before the requirement to implement a fire watch is invoked. However, this is not the case. The requirement applies when the sum of all outages in a 24-hour period exceeds more than four hours.

Fire watches require the continuous patrol of all areas of the building affected by the impairment to look for evidence of smoke, fire, or any abnormal conditions. As noted in its definition, if a life-threatening situation is discovered, the person conducting the fire watch must immediately contact emergency personnel, alert the occupants to the emergency and assist in their evacuation.

In addition to the occupied areas affected by the impairment, fire watchers must also check all unoccupied areas including storage rooms, crawl spaces, and any concealed areas. It is important that those conducting a fire watch be very familiar with the building and the equipment they are watching. They must also know the locations of all manual fire alarm stations and fire protection equipment available to them should they discover a fire. In addition, all activities associated with a fire watch must be documented. Therefore, anyone conducting the fire watch must also be trained in how to fill out fire watch log sheets.

The fire watch must remain in effect until the entire system is restored to proper working order and only after any necessary inspections and tests have been conducted to verify that affected systems are operational and the fire department has been notified.

FIRE WATCH BEST PRACTICES

- Always read, understand, and maintain the conditions stated on the hot work permit
- Inspect the work area before and after each shift for the potential release of flammable liquids or vapors.
- Keep flammable materials away from ignition sources.
- Maintain communication with the workers in the area.

- Stop operations immediately if you identify a hazard.
- Know the wind direction to understand where sparks and open flames with blow.
- Never leave the work area while hot work is going on. If you must go, stop the job, and notify the workers.

- Being prepared to contact the fire department.
- Being ready to extinguish any fires using a portable extinguisher or hose.

FINAL WORD

Fire watch personnel and practices are often under valuated and unappreciated because their work is not glamorous. But very necessary and appreciated by workers on the front line. They know their safety and security depends in the professionalism of these personnel.