Pressure Washing Fatality Report

Standing In fall of 2015, a 34-year-old Hispanic man was electrocuted while using a pressure washer to clean the interior of a swine finishing barn.1 He and a coworker had been assigned to pressure wash buildings at local farms managed by their employer.

The victim was a native of Honduras who had worked in the US for several months before moving to the local area. The incident occurred on his sixth day of work.

The day of the fatality, the victim and his coworker arrived to work at the farm where the incident later occurred. Their supervisor, the site manager, instructed them to clean the finishing barn's concrete floors and steel gate partitions using the electric-powered high pressure washer they had used in other buildings that week.

At mid-morning, the coworker left to work at a different farm, but he returned to eat lunch with the victim over the noon hour. During lunch, the two workers discussed that the washer continued to malfunction just as it had during the week. After lunch, the coworker went back to the farm where he had been working, and the victim resumed pressure washing alone. The site manager returned to the barn at 15:30 to check on the victim's progress and saw him inside, slumped over a steel gate partition along the center aisle of the main room.

The manager tried to rouse the unresponsive victim and pulled him to the loading dock area adjacent to the main room. The victim was cold and without a pulse. The manager called 911, and he then disconnected power at the circuit breaker and turned off the faucet supplying water to the pressure washer. Within several minutes, the county Sheriff, an ambulance crew, and local emergency responders arrived from a town nearby. The county Medical Examiner arrived at the site and pronounced the victim dead at 16:00.

The position of the victim’s body when found suggested that he had been leaning over the gate to reach the pressure washer. An autopsy identified an electrical burn injury to the victim’s right thigh where it had contacted the steel gate. The cause of death was determined to be electrocution.

Law enforcement agencies and the Iowa Division of Labor Services/Occupational Safety and Health Bureau (IOSHA) investigated the fatality. Interviews with the victim’s manager and coworker revealed that the pressure washer had a history of electric malfunction that was known to the manager and employees for several days preceding the fatality: workers who handled the metal wand or high pressure hose had received electric shocks; the machine “threw sparks” when its metal wand contacted other metal surfaces in the buildings; power surges of the pressure washer motor caused room lights on the same circuit to dim; and the machine periodically shut off while in operation. Four days before the fatality, it had short-circuited, tripping circuit breakers and burning a receptacle at a different farm building.