Wood Dust Fatality File

Cabinetmaker Died from Wood Dust Exposure

BILLINGS, MT – Acute, long-term exposure to wood dust led to the death of a 55-year-old finish sander at a Montana cabinet shop, OSHA says.

Following the January death of Tom Hegg, a 15-year employee at Oak Creations Inc., an OSHA inspection found 21 serious safety that exposed workers to respiratory hazards, fire, explosion, and amputation.

The citations were handed out July 27 by OSHA. The Columbus, MT-based cabinetmaker faces fines of $50,000.

Oak Creations was cited for insufficient housekeeping of combustible wood dust "on elevated surfaces and ledges from one-half inch in depth to approximately 2 inches in depth;" failing to evaluate respiratory hazards; multiple machine guard violations; inadequate guarding for shafts, belts and pulleys; multiple electrical violations; and failure to have developed a written hazard communication program.

OSHA also cited the cabinet company for failing to provide employees with information on respirators and for inadequate marking of fire exits.

Excessive inhalation of wood dust from certain species, including oak, mahogany, beech, walnut, birch, elm and ash, have been associated with nasal cancer in woodworkers. Set by OSHA, the permissible exposure limit for nuisance dust is 15 mg/m3, with a PEL for total dust of 5 mg/m3 over an 8 hour time weighted average. Stricter levels have been recommended by organizations such as NIOSH, which promotes 1 mg/m3 total dust. Wood dust has been classified as a known human carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC).

“Oak Creations could have implemented simple, common-sense measures to provide a safe workplace for employees,” Eric Brooks, OSHA’s area director in Billings, said in a statement. “The best way to honor Mr. Hegg is to ensure that his colleagues have a safe place to work.”

According to the Billings Gazette, Oak Creations’ owner Brett Barker leased the company this spring to Pete DeNotaris, and the name changed to OC Cabinetry. DeNotaris told the Gazette that improvements are already underway to improve the working environment for employees at the plant.