

WisCOSH: Three Wisconsin deaths at mill cited by OSHA show need for enforcement of safety laws

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Investigation at Cambria Corn Mill Underway; Dust Explosions are Known and Preventable Hazard

Milwaukee: Local and national safety advocacy groups said today that the tragic explosion at a corn mill in Cambria, Wisconsin shows the need for increased enforcement of safety laws and regulations.

“Our prayers are with the victims and families of this terrible event,” said Jim Schultz, executive director of the Wisconsin Committee on Occupational Safety and Health (WisCOSH). “Duelle Block, Robert Goodenow and Pawel Tordoff lost their lives working in a grain mill, where explosions caused by dust are a known and preventable hazard.”

An investigation of the May 31 explosion at the Didion Milling Plant in Cambria, which claimed the lives of Block, Goodenow and Tordoff and caused at least a dozen injuries is now underway. In 2011 Didion Milling was cited by the U.S. Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) for failing to equip its facility with equipment to protect against ignition and explosion of dust from grain accumulating inside the mill.

The citation was settled in 1983 for a fine of \$3,645.

Current OSHA standards to limit combustible dust standards apply to the grain

industry. The agency has been working on a new regulation which would apply to other industries – including food, wood, rubber, plastics and pharmaceuticals – since 2009. The U.S. Chemical Safety Board (CSB) says a general industry dust standard is needed “to prevent further tragedies,” but no final action has been taken to implement a new regulation.

“From long and sad experience, we know that most of the events in which workers become sick, are injured, or lose their lives are preventable,” said Marcy Goldstein Gelb, executive director of the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health (National COSH). “All employers must take pro-active steps to reduce workplace risks – but we can’t rely on voluntary action. OSHA needs resources to inspect workplaces issue fines and penalties, which have an important deterrent effect.”

“Employers are always talking about the cost of fines, and how it hurts their business,” said Schultz. “We also need to focus on the terrible cost to workers and the price paid by families when workers are put at risk in an unsafe environment. When an employer with 200 workers in a community with 700 residents closes down for an indeterminate time due to the amount of damage to the facility the casualties extend out far beyond the workers and their families. Safe and healthy workplaces make for thriving communities.”

Agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting are among the most dangerous U.S. industries, with 570 deaths in FY 2015, or 22.8 per thousand full-time equivalent workers.

Steps to prevent against dust explosion include inspection, testing and housekeeping controls; dust inspection and collection; eliminating dust sources that create hazardous environments; and controlling open flames and sparks, including sparks and friction generated by nearby machinery.