

Chemical recovery boiler bill supported by paper companies, labor groups

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Supporters of a bill to limit the frequency of inspections on certain paper mill machinery say the change would provide regulatory certainty to the industry as well as environmental benefits.

A similar bill cleared the Assembly and a Senate committee last session before stalling in the Senate as the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Wisconsin Paper Council President Scott Suder explained in a recent interview. This time around, he says the legislation has even broader support.

Under current state law, inspections of chemical recovery boilers are required every 12 months with the possibility of a six-month extension, he said. These boilers combust a fuel derived from wood chips to use the thermal energy in the paper production process, while also recovering sodium that is then reused. Under the bill, periodic inspections of insured boilers would be spaced 24 months apart.

“It sounds like a rather small change, but it is very important,” Suder (pictured here) told WisBusiness.com.

He said paper facilities often aren’t notified if the extension is granted until about a month before the initial one-year deadline, and that can cause “some real logistical problems.” Suder noted the inspections are a costly process as they require much of the plant to be shut down for several days.

He added that shutting down and restarting plant operations causes emissions to increase, arguing that reducing the frequency of these inspections would benefit the environment. And he said temperature changes caused by the boiler being cooled down for inspection stress the machine's structural integrity, weakening the boiler.

"A longer time period between inspections actually leads to a higher safety value for the boilers," Suder said.

Wisconsin has eight chemical recovery boilers that are owned by four companies, he said. Ahlstrom-Munksjo has two in Kaukauna and one in Mosinee, while Domtar has one boiler in Nekoosa. Packaging Corporation of America has one boiler in Tomahawk, and Verso Corporation has three in Wisconsin Rapids.

All four of these companies are supporting the legislation along with Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, the Wisconsin Industrial Energy Group and a number of unions including United Steelworkers, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers and others. These groups signed onto a memo recently sent to the Senate Labor and Regulatory Reform Committee, which held a public hearing on the bill last week.

The legislation was introduced in the Assembly and Senate by Sen. Pat Testin, R-Stevens Point, and Rep. Nancy VanderMeer, R-Tomah. It also has the support of several Democratic lawmakers. Suder says the Paper Council is working with the bill's authors to get a hearing in an Assembly committee and is hopeful the bill will be taken up soon on the Senate floor.

He sees the bill as "common sense reform" given that other states with large paper industries including Michigan and Maine have adopted a 24-month timeframe for boiler inspections.

See the bill text here:

<https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2021/related/proposals/sb466>

See the memo sent to the Senate committee:

https://www.wisbusiness.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/SB-466.Coalition-Memo-to-Senate-Labor-Committee.8-24-21.Final_.pdf

-By Alex Moe