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Safety Minder

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ARE YOU AWARE OF THE HAZARDS OF:
HEXAVALENT CHROMIUM

The Occupational Safety & Health Administration's (OSHA) latest standards are aimed at reducing occupational exposure to hexavalent chromium, a form of metal that is both toxic and carcinogenic. Hexavalent chromium or Cr(VI) is widely used in many industries and is found in pigments, metal plating, surface coatings and even Portland cement. It can also be present when workers are welding stainless steel or chrome-coated metals or handling Cr(VI)-treated surfaces.

Workplace exposure to Cr(VI) particles or fumes can yield serious health risks including lung cancer and sometimes permanent damage to one's nose, throat, lungs, eyes and/or skin. To protect workers, OSHA cut its permissible exposure limit from 52 to 5 micrograms of Cr(VI) per cubic meter of air on average over an 8-hour period. Employers must also conduct periodic monitoring, provide personal protective equipment (PPE) and clothing, and make medical exams available wherever Cr(VI) hazards are found. These standards apply to general industry usage as well as at construction sites and shipyards.

Because of the work we do and our emphasis on safety at S.M. Electric, we fully comply with these OSHA standards for hexavalent chromium and have trained our personnel accordingly. Whether assisting our customers with new construction or performing routine maintenance, our methods and procedures are designed to protect workers and reduce their risk of exposure to this hazardous compound. These procedures include the following.

Monitoring air quality and maintaining accurate records is essential for tracking exposure levels by work activity and worker. For example, regularly measuring Cr(VI) levels in stainless steel welding and monitoring welders on the job makes it easier to enforce exposure limits for worker safety. In the same way, employees who are exposed to, or regularly work with, Cr(VI) are medically monitored based on OSHA-specified exposure criteria. The goal of these baseline and routine medical exams is to prevent adverse health effects from Cr(VI).

Regulated areas are necessary wherever airborne exposure to Cr(VI) is expected to exceed permissible levels. This demarcation alerts employees as well as anyone in the area, to the hazards. It also establishes a safety protocol for those allowed to enter as well as for those exiting the area.

Use of PPE, protective work clothing and equipment such as coveralls, gloves and goggles, is determined based on the levels of airborne or direct contact exposure to Cr(VI). Respiratory protection is required for airborne concentrations above 5 micrograms of Cr(VI) per cubic meter of air. Worker safety also depends on proper handling of contaminated PPE. Everyone who handles PPE must be trained in proper removal, disposal, storage and cleaning techniques to prevent inadvertent Cr(VI) contamination.

Hygiene and housekeeping are also key factors in keeping the workplace safe. It follows that if employees must use PPE, then they need a room to change in/out of their protective gear. If Cr(VI) skin contact is possible, adequate washing facilities must be provided to minimize exposure. Being vigilant about clean-up of Cr(VI) surface accumulations and spills in the workplace using approved methods, such as HEPA-filtered vacuums, can also significantly reduce exposure risks.

Compliance training is of vital importance to instruct employees, supervisors and safety personnel on health hazards, safety procedures and workers' rights related to hexavalent chromium.

It's all part of our emphasis on safety that carries through everything we do. With the proper training and a solid core of methods and procedures, we can ensure the safety of worker and workplace while getting the job done right for our customers.

Why are we concerned?
Because it's the right thing to do!

S.M. Electric News

Giving Back to the Industry

S.M. Electric President and Chief Operating Officer John J. Murphy recently took over the reins as President of the Northern New Jersey Chapter of the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA). His appointment continues a legacy of industry service that S.M. Electric has fostered for over 60 years. "At S.M. Electric, we have always believed that when the industry is strong, everyone benefits: customers, contractors, unions and employees. That's why we have devoted so much time and effort over the years to serving the industry through leadership and training roles in various organizations," Murphy explained.

Murphy assumes the role at a pivotal time in the industry, with competition looming from non-union labor and four key labor contracts up for renegotiation.

S.M. Electric's 60+ year legacy of partnership with the IBEW has fostered an atmosphere of mutual respect and cooperation with key union leaders.

"We look forward to arriving at a mutually satisfactory conclusion to our labor talks," Murphy remarked. "Both sides understand the challenges we face in the marketplace, as well as the abundance of customer service opportunities we can leverage once our agreements are in place."

Murphy himself has the benefit of a broad industry view, having served on the Northern NJ Chapter's Executive Committee in various capacities for over 10 years. This new position represents a natural progression for him, and affords him the opportunity to advance the industry during a critical time.

"This has always been a competitive industry, but it's becoming more so. We can no longer take for granted that the customer will choose a union contractor; we must consistently outperform and underbid our non-union competition in order to maintain our market share," he said.

One way Murphy plans to achieve this industry-wide upgrade in standards is by continuing to emphasize the Code of Excellence workplace conduct rules developed last year by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and supported by NECA. The program's purpose is twofold: to inspire a higher level of commitment on the part of union workers, and to demonstrate to customers that by hiring union contractors, they will obtain a more productive, high quality and safety-conscious workforce.

So far, the program seems to be fulfilling its objectives. The positive attitude generated in the workforce has resulted in a very favorable response from customers. Another benefit is increased efficiency on the job, which in turn enables union contractors to place more competitive bids and enhance customer satisfaction.

This is the type of progress that Murphy, the Executive Committee and the entire Association will be working towards in the year ahead: measurable growth that also promotes an awareness of the industry's commitment to excellence and customer service.

Attitude:
"Ask yourself a question: Is my attitude worth catching?"
– Zig Zigler