

Top Ten Safety Stories of 2008

December 19, 2008 By Fred Hosier

New regulations; accidents with multiple fatalities; the President-elect's take on what OSHA should be doing. What is the top safety story of 2008?

We polled our editors of safety publications at Progressive Business and came up with this list:

10. More research on dangers of nanoparticles to exposed employees. Among the new studies, one that showed long, thin carbon nanotubes exhibited the same effects as long, thin asbestos fibers when injected into mice.

9. The National Institutes of Health says the superbug methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) is no longer limited to hospitals. Outbreaks of one strain — community-associated MRSA — have turned up in athletes, prison inmates, the military, daycare attendees and those who live in communal conditions such as college dormitories.

8. MSHA proposes and enacts a flurry of new mining rules in the wake of previous years' mining disasters, such as Crandall Canyon, including: a policy letter on underground communication and tracking devices; a new final rule that increases the pounds per square inch that pressure seals must withstand in an explosion; a proposal to test miners for drugs and alcohol; and a final rule requiring additional safety

equipment for rescue teams at underground mines.

7. California gets serious with heat stress on the job. The company that hired a pregnant teen who died of heat stroke this spring after working in a vineyard without enough shade or water was hit with the highest fine ever issued to a farming operation in the state. Merced Farm Labor's license was also revoked until Aug. 24, 2011 after the death of Maria Jimenez.

6. The employer payment for most types of PPE rule takes effect. OSHA started enforcing the new rule May 15, 2008. The only exceptions: non-specialty safety-toe protective footwear; shoes or boots with built-in metatarsal protection requested by an employee; logging boots; and everyday work or ordinary clothing used solely for protection from weather.

5. An explosion at an Imperial Sugar Refinery near Savannah, GA, kills 14 people and injures dozens more. The blast destroyed a packaging plant. The cause, ignition of dust, placed an emphasis on workplace ignitable dust hazards.

4. Amendment to the Americans with Disabilities Act to place burden on employers. The revision may dramatically increase the number of employees who can legally qualify as disabled. Action step for employers and those in charge of safety: Instead of an open-ended light-duty

assignment that might define a worker as disabled, re-assess the returning worker's condition every two weeks.

3. Distracted drivers prove fatal and costly. A Sept. 12 collision between two trains in California killed 25 people. The National Transportation Safety Board is still investigating, but preliminary information shows the locomotive engineer of one train was using his cell phone to text within 30 seconds of the accident. In the wake of the crash, the Federal Railroad Administration enacted a new rule banning railroad employees from using cell phones (except in emergencies) and other electronic devices on the job. In another case, International Paper Co. agreed to pay \$5.2 million to settle a personal injury lawsuit after one of its employees used her cell phone while driving for work. The employee hit another car, and its driver had to have an arm amputated as a result.

2. Now OSHA can multiply PPE and training fines by the number of employees. Under a new rule, OSHA can issue per-employee citations for those types of violations starting Jan. 12, 2009.

1. President-elect Barack Obama promises an "invigorated" OSHA. Obama supported the Protecting America's Workers Act as a Senator. The bill would increase OSHA penalties. Obama has also called on OSHA to issue standards "in a timely and more effective manner." While the financial crisis may delay some reforms the new administration may want, some changes can be made by just shifting existing funding.