

Buried in Sawdust



A worker died from suffocation after he was buried in a sawdust bin at a wood processing plant.

He had backed a truck under the bin and was attempting to load sawdust. The auger was turning in the overhead bin but the sawdust was not falling into the truck. So the worker climbed the ladder to the top of the bin and attempted to break the sawdust free with a length of pipe. When this was unsuccessful, he entered the bin without putting on the available lifeline. As he stepped on the crusted surface of the sawdust, it collapsed. He fell into the sawdust and was buried.

Sawdust continued to be blown into the bin from the adjoining wood processing plant during the several hours before the worker was reported missing. A supervisor entered the bin, also without the lifeline. He also sank into the sawdust but was rescued.

Many factors contributed to this fatality. Standard confined space entry procedures should have been followed. Safety equipment should have been used for entering the bin of unstable material. A standby person should have been on duty to communicate with the worker in the confined space and to initiate a rescue. The coroner who conducted the inquiry also recommended a system of electrical interlocks should have been in place so the blower would not have continued to move sawdust into the bin while it was occupied. Also apparently lacking at the plant was a confined space permit system. Confined space work requires a written policy and continuing training.