Can You Let Workers Remove Respirator to Prevent Heat Stress? – Ask the Expert



Question

Your workers are about to enter a storage bin to perform cleaning operations. The bin is a permit confined space; and since it has an IDLH (immediately dangerous to life and health) atmosphere, workers must use a respirator to do the work. Normally, that's not a problem. But you're in the middle of a July heat wave and workers are concerned that wearing a respirator will cause them to get heat stress. And let's just assume they're right.

What's your best option?

A.) Let them remove their respirators just this once so they don't get heat stress

B.) Make them wear their respirators because IDLH dangers are more immediate

C.) Put off the operation until the weather cools

D.) Let them do the operation without respirators but in short work/rest cycles

Answer

1. Postponing the operation is a viable option; the other 3 are not.

Explanation:

You can't let workers enter a confined space containing an IDLH atmosphere without a respirator; but making workers use a respirator (or other PPE) isn't acceptable if it means putting them at risk of heat stress.

The only viable option, then, is to find a way to conduct the operation so that both risks are dealt with, i.e., one that enables the workers to do the job using respirators but without risking heat stress. Postponing the operation until the weather cools is one possibility. And while it's not the only possibility, it's the only one of the listed options that doesn't require trading protection against one form of hazard for protection against another.

So, C is the right answer.

Why Wrong Answers Are Wrong

- A is wrong because letting workers enter an IDLH atmosphere confined space is not only illegal but insane—unless your intent is to kill or seriously harm them.
- B is wrong because use of respirators may heighten heat stress risks. In this situation, the answer is not to dispense with the respirator but find a way so that workers can use it without getting heat stress.
- D is wrong because it allows for the work to be done without a respirator. But change the phrase “without respirators” to “with respirators,” and it could be a viable option.