Don’t Confine Your Safety



Safety Talk

Any time fuel is burned, carbon monoxide is a hazard. For example, three workers died after inhaling carbon monoxide in an oil well cellar in California.

The oil and gas industry is littered with confined spaces. The obvious ones are vessels and storage tanks. The not so obvious are trenches and pits.

The fact is confined spaces are a silent killer. Employees go in, and if procedures aren’t followed, they never come out alive. So what can you do to protect yourself?

First, know the definition of a confined space. A confined space must meet three criteria:

1. Limited means of entry (one way in, same way out)
2. Not designed for continuous occupancy
3. A space large enough for somebody to perform work.

An employer must determine whether the space requires an entry permit. Does the space:

- Meet the definition of a confined space?
- Contain or have potential to contain a hazardous atmosphere?
- Have a potential entrapment hazard?

The bottom line is if the confined space has potentially hazardous atmospheres, such as toxic vapors or lack of oxygen, you must take additional steps to ensure your safety.

Testing the atmosphere

An important step is testing the atmosphere for toxicity by using an air monitor. Also check the oxygen level. One method is to lower the instrument sensor to the bottom of the confined space and slowly lift it up and keep an eye on the readout.

Training

If you enter a confined space, you must have additional training to perform work in that space. For example, you must know what type of personal protective equipment you will need. A job safety analysis (JSA) is a great tool to ensure that all procedures are in place. You must know what special precautions are required to reduce or eliminate exposure to life-threatening hazards. For example, proper ventilation and/or lockout procedures may be necessary.

Your supervisor’s role

Your supervisor must ensure that all precautions are addressed by double-checking your preparations.

Lifelines

When you enter a confined space you must have an attendant on the outside with a lifeline and radio communication. The attendant ensures that you and any other entrants are accounted for. But he never enters the confined space under any circumstances.

Confined spaces can pose serious hazards. But if you follow simple procedures, these spaces don’t have to be so threatening.