

# When Plant Safety Blows Up In Your Face

By Amanda McGowan, Associate Editor, *Chem.Info*

Alongside the road near the We Energies coal-fired power plant in Oak Creek, WI, a sign reads: "[We have worked 'X' hours without a lost time accident.](#)" [1] For the \$175 million facility that has been operating since October 2007, those hours really began to add up-an accomplishment any plant can appreciate.

However, on February 3, 2009, the number dropped to zero when a dust collection silo, which was built in November 2007, exploded and injured six workers inside of it. As of February 13, three remained hospitalized for the burns that they suffered.

When a tragedy like this happens-all one can think is: "What went wrong?"

At We Energies, it seems that what went wrong was the critical repairs necessary in the silo simply took too long-and the workers preparing for those repairs paid the price.

According to news sources, We Energies inspected the silo on January 25, recognized the need for repairs to the fire suppression system and reportedly halted use of the silo. The United States Fire Protection firm planned to perform the necessary maintenance. The workers injured in the explosion were employees of a scaffolding subcontracting firm; they were constructing work platforms in preparation for the fire suppression system repairs.

The silo, one of nine at the plant, uses vacuum processes to collect dust from coal brought by train to the power plant. The coal dust is then transferred to the plant and burned for fuel.

According to JSOnline, the National Fire Protection Association reports that coal dust can become explosive when it reaches a certain concentration in a confined area. An explosive concentration could obscure objects viewed from about 6 feet away with the lightest dust particles being the most hazardous, as they can rise unnoticed. Any heat or sparks from operating machinery, static electricity, or cutting or welding can ignite this combustible dust in an industrial setting, such as at the We Energies coal facility.

Most likely, this information is nothing that We Energies, or any plant managers or personnel reading this, doesn't know. However, it serves as a reminder to be aware of any necessary repairs and to take action fast. We Energies knew something was wrong with this silo, but before they did anything about it, it was too late. That silo was destined to blow, and it did so, unfortunately, with workers inside.

This situation prompts the question-is your plant ready? We Energies says that they conducted routine checks, and the Oak Creek Fire Department says that while it

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checked the facility twice per year and hired a fire safety consultant from Illinois to check the silos, the silo was We Energies' responsibility to ensure the fire suppression system was functioning properly. Do you know what your plant's responsibilities are?

The [September 2008 issue of Chem.Info](#) [2] delves even further into the consequences of not having a handle on the dust hazards in your plant, but the We Energies incident is an ideal example of doing too little, too late.

This type of accident could happen to any plant thinking that it's doing everything right, while realizing too late that it should've acted faster.

Today the We Energies coal-handling facility, which is part of a \$2.3 billion construction project to expand the Oak Creek power plant, is back in operation. For now, the plant is reverting back to its old way of dealing with coal dust-a dust suppression system that sprays water-until the silo is repaired.

However, the company must still deal with lawsuits from some of the explosion victims, the after-effects of the explosion on the facility and the larger construction project, and, of course, starting all over at zero hours without an accident.

Sources: [www.jsonline.com](http://www.jsonline.com) [3], [www.bizjournals.com/milwaukee](http://www.bizjournals.com/milwaukee) [4], [www.wsaw.com](http://www.wsaw.com) [5]

What's your take? Feel free to send me an e-mail at [amanda.mcgowan@advantagemedia.com](mailto:amanda.mcgowan@advantagemedia.com) [6].

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### Links:

[1]

<http://www.jsonline.com/multimedia/photos/38983709.html?c=y&index=4&page=1>

[2] <http://www.chem.info/ShowPR~PUBCODE~075~ACCT~0000100~ISSUE~0901~RELTYPE~PPRO~PRODCODE~13710~PRODLETT~G.html>

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