Worker Presumed Dead In Silo Collapse

Associated Press

ROY, Wash. (AP) — A worker was missing and presumed dead after a silo collapsed and spilled 50 tons of corn at a facility that was cited this year for six "serious" safety violations, officials said Tuesday.

Rescuers will be unable to recover the body until they stabilize two other silos that were damaged in Monday's accident at the Wilcox Family Farms facility in Roy, South Pierce Fire & Rescue Chief Bob Vellias said.

"Our fear is that when we eradicate the corn and grain away from the silo, it will compromise the damaged silos and create another issue," Vellias said. "It's going to collapse on the area we're trying to work on."

The worker was one of two performing maintenance on the silo when it gave way for an unknown reason, Vellias said. The other worker and two people in a nearby office escaped.

In its most recent safety inspection, the Wilcox Family Farms facility was cited for six "serious" safety violations, according to records provided by the state Department of Labor and Industries. The company was assessed a $10,000 penalty after that June review.

Brent Wilcox, one of the business's owners, told The News Tribune that the company is deeply saddened by the loss of an employee.

"We're a family company," he said. "We treat all our employees like family members." The company did not immediately return calls from The Associated Press seeking comment.

Wilcox Family Farms supplies eggs throughout the Northwest.

Inspectors cited the company for not having adequate rescue and emergency services available around a "containment pit" and a corn tank. The state wrote in documents that employees who entered confined spaces were at risk of serious injury or death if adequate emergency services were not available to safely remove them from the space.

Another serious violation said the company failed to fully inform employees of the hazardous conditions and required duties when working in the containment pit and corn tank.

Elaine Fischer, a Labor and Industries spokeswoman, said it wasn't clear whether parts of the facility cited in the inspection were at issue in the collapse. She said inspectors have been gathering information about the collapse.

Stabilization work at the mill in Roy, about 50 miles south of Seattle, could take until Wednesday. When the scene is safe, rescuers plan to bring in a large vacuum truck used to clean storm drains to remove the grain, Vellias said.

Rescuers have trained with the equipment to move dirt, the fire chief said.

"We'll create a snorkel into the area and vac the corn away, like sand," Vellias said.

The missing man is in his 50s. His name was not released, and investigators won't know exactly how he died until his body is recovered.

The Wilcox family is well-known in the community, Vellias said.

"I can't say enough about the family," he said. "They've been a great supporter of us."

The silo was about 75 feet tall and 25 feet across. It was in the middle of a dozen silos of varying sizes. The two damaged silos are 40 to 50 feet tall and about 16 feet across said. One silo leaning against the office holds flax, he said.

The mill mixes corn, wheat and other grains into chicken feed.

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