

Sawmill Fire Illustrates Combustible Dust & Other Hazards



The recent explosion and fire at a sawmill in BC killed two workers and sent 24 people to the hospital. This tragedy highlights several different safety hazards and issues that all workplaces should address.

Combustible Dust

Combustible dust, such as dust from wood, coal, rubber, grain, sugar, flour, cardboard and aluminum, is particles in the air that are apt to explode under certain conditions. Combustible dust explosions can cause extensive property damage and result in numerous injuries and fatalities.

Although the cause of the sawmill explosion is still under investigation, WorkSafeBC is looking into the accumulation of combustible dust because the mill had been cutting wood harvested from forests ravaged by the mountain pine beetle, which produces a fine, dry sawdust.

This incident was the second in three months at a mill in BC. So safety inspectors are inspecting all the mills in the province to ensure they're properly managing dust buildup.

Obviously, you want to prevent combustible dust from building up in your workplace. But improper cleaning methods can create dust clouds that can explode. So WorkSafeBC released a

[bulletin](#) on safely cleaning up hazardous dust.

Click [here](#) for information on what the OHS laws require employers to do about combustible dust in the workplace.

Emergency Preparedness

The sawmill explosion also highlights the importance of emergency preparedness. For example, emergency response teams had to scramble to make sure they'd located and evacuated everyone from the building—a process made more complicated because they didn't have access to shift records. So they didn't know exactly who was working and where at the time of the explosion.

To ensure that your company is adequately prepared for an emergency, go to the OHS Insider's [Emergency Preparedness & Response Compliance Centre](#), where you'll learn how to:

- Be prepared to [respond effectively](#) to emergencies, such as fires and explosions
- Update fire safety plans for [industrial workplaces](#) or [offices](#)
- Create a [business continuity plan](#) to ensure that your company's operations can continue in the aftermath of an emergency.

Visitor Safety

Lastly, the sawmill was filled with not only workers but visitors. For example, a union official was in the lunchroom with others for a training session.

Although safety professionals generally—and understandably—focus on the safety of workers, employers also have a duty to ensure the safety of visitors to their facilities. Click [here](#) for information on how to create a visitor safety policy.