

Backgrounder Confined Spaces

What is a confined space?

According to Part 9 of the *Occupational Health and Safety Regulation* a confined space means an area, other than an underground working, that

- (a) is enclosed or partially enclosed,
- (b) is not designed or intended for continuous human occupancy,
- (c) has limited or restricted means for entry or exit that may complicate the provision of first aid, evacuation, rescue or other emergency response service, and
- (d) is large enough and so configured that a worker could enter to perform assigned work;

So just what does this mean?

Look at the space that you are about to enter – does the space contain walls that may prevent you from getting out of the area? Is it a space where people do not work in most of the time? Is it hard to get into or out of? Is the space big enough to work in?

If you answered yes to all of these questions, then the space you are about to enter is a Confined Space. Now ask yourself if it is possible that there may be no air or deadly air in the space? Is there a chance that you can be trapped by machinery or by the material contained in there? Think about the space that you are about to enter and ask the question is this or is this not a space that you can safely enter and is there enough clean air to breathe.

Some examples of confined spaces include silos, vats, ship holds, sewers, tunnels, large pipelines and tanks. Clearly, a manhole entry to a sewer system is a confined space. Possibly less obvious is a utilities tunnel into a commercial building, or a tank inside a pit which is a confined space within a confined space.

Why are confined spaces so dangerous?

Working in confined spaces is a dangerous business which is compounded by a lack of awareness of the hazards involved. Entry into a confined space is a complex process and to try to rescue an injured worker is even more complicated. All too often the immediacy of the moment causes even experienced and well trained workers to forget to protect themselves in the attempt to help someone else. This temporary lapse often has fatal results for both the rescuer and the injured worker.

What are the statistics?

From 1997 to 2003, 10 workers lost their life when they entered a confined space which did not have a sufficient amount of breathable air to sustain life. What makes this statistic so sad is that 60% of these deaths occurred while attempting to rescue someone else. Four of these fatalities occurred in 2003 alone.

How is WCB addressing this issue?

With the advent of the 2010 Olympics and the expected increase in construction projects, the demand for labour is growing which will be filled by young workers with little or no experience. This may set the stage for increased fatalities caused by confined space entry or rescue.

WCB is working proactively to address this concern by implementing various programs that involve confined spaces. As part of this initiative, the Board along with the GVRD and BCIT has targeted a demonstration aimed at young apprentices and students as part of the North American Occupational Safety & Health week.

Other programs currently under development will target specific industries and will be launched within the next few months. Awareness of the dangers inherent with confined space entry and rescue will be an ongoing theme throughout this program.

What resources are available now and where do you get further information?

WCB maintains a website which contains numerous awareness bulletins, hazard alerts, guidelines and general information that is readily available to all industry stakeholders. The gateway to this site is www.healthandsafetycentre.org/s/home.asp where you can follow the link to the confined spaces topic.