



After Fernie: Ensuring Compliance and Preparedness

On August 29th WorkSafeBC released a 74-page report on their investigation into the tragic deaths of three men following an ammonia leak at an arena facility in Fernie last year.

According to the report: "Poor communication and inconsistent attention to internal auditing, inspections, incident investigation and emergency practice drills allowed for the development of hazardous workplace conditions."

The report cites multiple Occupational Health and Safety Regulation failures by Fernie, as well as Workers Compensation Act failures by both the city and the service contractor. Fernie received the majority of the violations, including:

- emergency response procedures that were inadequate or not followed—including failures to train workers and conduct drills
- failure to perform hazard assessments and inspections of equipment to prevent unsafe working conditions
- failure to develop and implement an exposure control plan for ammonia

You can read the full report [here](#).

The Fernie deaths are all the more tragic because they were avoidable. Armed with the knowledge of what caused this incident, it is critical to ensure that a similar event does not happen in the future.

Unfortunately, in our professional capacity we have found that numerous ammonia facilities have inadequate emergency response procedures, infrequently reviewed or conducted emergency drills and a significant lack of exposure training and preparedness. In the majority of these cases, management falsely believed they were compliant because they had passed a technical standards inspection and had a document or two on file for emergency response. The Ontario Recreation Facilities Association (ORFA) conducted a webinar on March 29th, 2018 and reported findings consistent with our own: ammonia facility management that failed to keep emergency plans current and practiced, and a lack of competency for unattended refrigeration equipment operators—including being underprepared to deal with a significant ammonia leak.

This false sense of compliance and preparedness most often occurs because management either doesn't know the right questions to ask, or isn't sure what a good safety and emergency program should consist of. The situation is made worse when facility managers do not qualify or review service contractors' programs or methods and/or rely on EMS or fire services to cover emergency protocols—which is not necessarily in accordance with legislative requirements.

Between 2015 and 2018 in North America there have been at least 23 incidents of ammonia releases, including 8 fatalities.

Anyone responsible for the safety of others around ammonia is strongly encouraged to seek professional assistance in the development of their programs and procedures. This begins with responding to the following questions:

1. How have you fully ensured the safety of all workers and the public in your ammonia facilities?
2. How are you ensuring that your service contractors have an ammonia program that is complete and compliant for emergency, maintenance and exposure control, and able to integrate with your facilities requirements?
3. How thorough is your exposure control plan?
4. How can you verify that your staff, contractors and operators are all competent in following the programs and procedures you have in place and are able to carry out an emergency response to a minor or major leak?

After the WorkSafeBC report on the Fernie incident, ignorance is not a valid excuse for non-compliance when it comes to ammonia safety. A lack of certainty or inability to thoroughly answer any of the above questions can indicate a significant risk to the occupants and users of your facility.

At Barantas, we have been building comprehensive and robust health and safety and emergency response programs since 2002. We go to great lengths to help ammonia facility managers, municipality directors and contractors appreciate what reasonable preparedness can look like.

A professionally performed audit is the only true confirmation of compliance and preparedness. Let us work with you to ensure you are taking every reasonable precaution to protect those who rely on you to keep them safe while inside your facility. By booking a professional audit today you are taking the first step in preventing an incident tomorrow.

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