



Safety Matters!

Have you checked your catwalks?

It was a lunch break that no one in the building would ever forget. Everyone sat in total silence when it was announced that the catwalk over bin number four had fallen. Only minutes before, two employees had been working on the catwalk some forty feet in the air, unloading railcars of dry fertilizer into storage. One of the most routine activities performed practically every day at fertilizer facilities across the country, was suddenly viewed in a whole new light. Who would have ever thought to check the supports that held the catwalk? After all, the structure was constructed of “practically” all wood and was built sometime in the early 60’s; a time period when lumber was rough-cut, thick and substantial.

As lunch was finished slowly by the employees, they recounted the repairs they had made to the catwalk over the years. There weren’t many. For the most part, the catwalk appeared to be in great condition and had reliably served its purpose for more than four decades. Sure, they replaced the boards that made up the elevated floor and even some side railings as they became weak or cracked, but no one ever really thought about the supports. As the employees talked about all the things that could have happened, their attention turned to the portion of the catwalk that was “out of sight - out of mind,” a small but crucial component - one not made of wood.

It made perfect sense as the discussion unfolded, that the catwalk was held together by nails and bolts. Metal, which is very susceptible to the naturally corrosive forces of fertilizer, became the weakest link. While the wood was still in good shape after years of service, the hidden connectors that literally held things together became weak and finally gave way. This is a case that easily could have resulted in serious injury and even death if the catwalk had given way with unsuspecting workers on it.

This harrowing experience should serve as a “wake-up” call for all facilities to thoroughly inspect existing structures, especially elevated platforms of all types within their operation. It serves as a special advisory to look beyond the obvious for the weakest link.

Ultimately, the management of this facility sought the help of professionals to inspect the entire building and learned the structural integrity of the building was compromised. The condition of the building was placing all employees and customers in harm's way. The 15,000 ton structure was almost 50 years old and had developed some serious structural problems. In this case, the owners elected to replace the building and have reported they began seeing the benefits daily in a safer and more efficient workplace.

While everyone can't replace an entire fertilizer building, they can and should take the necessary action to inspect their structures routinely before things come crashing down!

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The names of the employees and company have been changed to protect their identity. This information is believed to be reliable by NAEHSS and the Asmark Institute, however, because of constantly changing government regulations, interpretations and applicability or the possibility of human, mechanical or computer error, the publisher does not guarantee the information. Users must satisfy themselves the information is suitable for any specific purpose.

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