



OH&S Bulletin

HOW TO FIND HAZARDOUS SUBSTANCES BEFORE THEY FIND YOU

Employers in the construction industry have an obligation under the occupational health and safety regulations to make sure that a site is safe before any job starts. This means that a professional environmental consultant should do a thorough investigation of the site to identify and assess any hazardous substances

A report should be given to the employer (and made available to Health and Safety Representatives) so that any hazardous substances can be dealt with before the job starts. The report is called a “site audit”, “risk assessment”. Or sometimes both. The difficulty is that because doing and interpreting a site audit/assessment takes a lot of training, it is hard for the employer or health and safety representatives to know whether an audit has been done properly.

The CFMEU has come across more than one job recently where an audit has failed to identify hazardous substances that were on the site.

Even though reading a site audit can be complicated, don't be put off by unfamiliar terms and language. There are things you can watch for that will give you some idea of whether the audit has been done properly.

Some Tips for Reading a Site Audit

- Check that the audit is up to date.
- Make sure that it's a full hazard audit and not just an asbestos audit. The site should be checked for anything that could be hazardous to the workers or the public. This could include chemicals, lead paints, synthetic mineral fibres (eg fiberglass or rockwool insulation), asbestos and PCB's.
- Sometimes the hygienist can't get access to certain areas, but workers will be expected to work there once the job starts. An audit should show whether this is the case, but you should check yourself that there are no cavities or areas that have not been tested. If you find any, no access should be allowed into the area until it has been opened and checked for any hazardous materials.
- If the site has been used for industrial or some commercial purposes, the soil should be tested for any contamination, including chemicals and heavy metals.



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Some Tips for Reading a Site Audit Continued

- Asbestos related disease is becoming more widespread, even though we know how dangerous it is. Asbestos is very common in old buildings. Places it can often be found include cement pipes, sheets and roofing, pipe lagging, packing around pumps and valves, boilers, pipe lagging, and fire doors. Lots of old vinyl wall and floor tiles were made with asbestos. If there are different kinds or colours of tiles on the job they should all be checked – thoroughly.

Asbestos is not spread evenly through the tiles so one sample can be clear and another can contain asbestos. If asbestos is found, the report should show what kind of asbestos it is, what condition it is in and whether is friable or non-friable. Friable asbestos is more dangerous. The CFMEU Environmental and Occupational Health and Safety Unit has developed a site safety check list to help Health and Safety Representatives make sure that they and others are not exposed to asbestos.

PCB's are another common problem. They are often found in capacitors and electrical equipment. Capacitors are usually enclosed in an oval shaped "can", about 40mm x 25 mm x 112mm. Others are rectangular and can be painted or unpainted. Capacitors can also be found in electrical control circuits, usually in a grey plated enclosure.

Hazardous materials must be removed by especially trained workers and they must be disposed of properly. If any are to remain on site, they must be clearly labeled and identifiable to anyone in the area and should not be disturbed in any way.

Authorised by Pat Preston, Manager, CFMEU Environmental & Occupational Health and Safety Unit