

Natural Disaster Planning and Training

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Storm season is in full swing, so it's time to revisit your emergency response plans and ensure that your physical plant and your employees are properly prepared and trained. Natural disasters can wreak havoc on a food processing facility, not only causing physical damage to the building, but also resulting in a huge economic loss in product and production downtime.

Emergency response plans are not only required by regulatory agencies, but serve to protect the plant and its employees. The plan is only effective if every employee is included in the plan, understands his / her role and is able to properly implement the plan when needed. For example, each department should have a preferred means of reporting - who is authorized to pull the alarm, who can shut down the production lines, who will pull the ammonia shut-off switch? These lines of authority are crucial to implementing your facility's plan in an emergency.

Plan, Partner and Prioritize

Your disaster response plan should begin with these three activities:

1. Plan: A generic emergency response plan is not sufficient. Your plan must be specific to your location and your product. Begin by looking at what natural disasters are likely to occur in your region of the country, whether it's a tornado, hurricane, fire or flood. Then, look at the possible implications of that disaster on your physical building, but also on your product and supply chain. Chart out what areas of your plant are impacted by a power outage, what processes may shut down due to the loss of rooftop equipment, and what key areas should be protected from water damage.

The purpose of an emergency response plan is to protect your assets, especially your employees. It's important to appoint a response team that understands all of your plant's systems and how those systems can be safely shut down in the event of a disaster. In case of a fire, how do you secure your ammonia or refrigeration systems to prevent a release and who is responsible for safely engaging the system shutdown? What's your plan to evacuate the building immediately and efficiently and how will you account for all employees? Industry groups and government regulatory agencies are a great resource and provide requirements and recommendations your plant can follow in developing a plan.

2. Partner: Based on the types of natural disasters that may occur in your region, identify local partners who can quickly respond to your specific needs. If you lose power, don't solely rely on the local power company to restore it quickly. They must serve the needs of the entire community. Have your own plan in place with partners and your local utility. Reach out to local partners and vendors to be part of your response team. Know where you can obtain industrial generators and how they will be transported to your facility. Identify equipment suppliers who can quickly replace lost rooftop equipment necessary for production and have construction partners who can readily obtain materials and repair any building damage. Choose partners who have the knowledge base, expertise and network of suppliers who can respond quickly with necessary parts and equipment.

3. Prioritize: Following a natural disaster, you'll need to prioritize which areas of your facility need attention first. Do freezers need to be restored first to avoid loss of product? Poultry plants may rely on automatic feeding systems that need to be restored to protect the supply chain. Don't discount the need to get utilities restored quickly to heat water for sanitation.

One important step that many plants neglect is to keep copies of your emergency plan and contact information for all partners off-site. Chances are, you won't be able to return to the building to access this information, so ensure you have response information stored off-site and in cell phones.

Training

You've conducted the required emergency response training with your employees,

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but are they truly prepared for an incident? Recognizing that government-mandated training is often not enough, many food processing safety managers are going above and beyond mandated requirements and customizing training to ensure employees are prepared for a range of unexpected scenarios. Below are five key steps you can take to ensure your employees are prepared for any emergency:

1. Identify leaders among your employees who have the authority and skills to direct others during an emergency. Emergency leaders should be high-performing employees who are confident and adequately cross-trained among divisions.

2. Use interactive training methods to ensure your employees truly absorb the information. Employees can benefit from a variety of teaching methods including instructor-led training, online self-paced training, and attending safety classes at a local university.

3. Incorporate unexpected situations into drills to prevent employees from simply going through the motions and to see how they will react. Host debriefings afterward to discuss what worked, how the response could be more effective, and to solicit ideas and input from your team.

4. Access to safety equipment is critical to emergency response. Again, plan for the unexpected. Can employees easily locate and access emergency equipment in the dark? Is it accessible along evacuation routes? Does your supply include face shields, respirators, safety glasses, hard hats, earplugs, and personal protective equipment for each employee? Do you audit your supply to ensure the personal protective equipment will be available when it is required?

5. Engage partners as part of your plant's training program, as they'll most likely be onsite immediately following an emergency. Invite first responders from your Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) as well as vendors and service providers to participate in drills and safety meetings.

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