

Food manufacturer fined after workers are exposed to sulphur dioxide

A food manufacturing company, based in Holbeach Lincolnshire, has been fined after employees were exposed to sulphur dioxide (SO₂) gas released as a result of poor planning and unsafe systems of work during the commissioning and operation of a new potato processing line.

Lincoln Magistrates' Court heard that AH Worth Ltd (formerly known as QV Foods Ltd) purchased a new potato processing line in 2018. The purchased line dipped the cut potatoes into a substance (Microsoak) to prevent them browning. The purchase, installation and commissioning work was poorly planned. During commissioning, the Microsoak gave off sulphur dioxide gas that affected workers in the packhouse. The company made modifications to the line to attempt to cure the problem, but it caused the nozzles on the line to repeatedly block up and more sulphur dioxide to be given off. A maintenance engineer attempting to unblock the nozzles on the 11 June 2018 was badly exposed to the sulphur dioxide. The factory had to be evacuated and other workers in the vicinity were also affected. The maintenance engineer and another worker were so badly affected that they were not able to return to work due to the effects of the gas on their lungs.

An investigation carried out by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) found that the work should have been properly planned mindful of the risks involved. There should have been adequate flows of information between QV Foods Ltd and the contractors involved. Commissioning should have been properly planned. When they started to have problems, they should have stopped and properly evaluated the solutions before going ahead and modifying the line. The maintenance workers and those on the line should have been provided with adequate information, instruction and training about the new line and what to do. There should have been a safe system of work in place for unblocking the nozzles and the workers should have been provided with additional PPE.

AH Worth Ltd of Manor Farm Holbeach Hurn, Spalding, pleaded guilty to breaching Section 2(1) of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 in that it failed to ensure, so far as was reasonably practicable, the health and safety at work of its employees. The company were fined £300,000 and ordered to pay costs of £9924.90 with a victim surcharge of £170.

Speaking after the hearing HSE inspector Mr Martin Giles said: "This was a tragic and wholly avoidable incident, caused by the failure of the company to plan properly for the introduction of new plant and equipment. It made alterations to the new plant without adequate thought and planning, failed to implement safe systems of work and failed to react adequately when things started to go wrong".

Notes to Editors:

1. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is Britain's national regulator for workplace health and safety. We prevent work-related death, injury and ill health through regulatory actions that range from influencing behaviours across whole industry sectors through to targeted interventions on individual businesses. These activities are supported by globally recognised scientific expertise. hse.gov.uk
2. At the time of the incident in June 2018 the company was known as QV Foods Ltd, but in 2019 I changed its name to AH Worth Ltd
3. More about the legislation referred to in this case can be found at: legislation.gov.uk/
4. HSE news releases are available at <http://press.hse.gov.uk>