

Safe-in-Sound Recognizes Excellence in Hearing Loss Prevention

NIOSH and NHCA have partnered to establish the Safe-in-Sound™ Award, intended to identify and recognize excellence in hearing loss prevention programs in the US. The first Safe-in-Sound Awards were presented at the 2009 NHCA conference in Atlanta, where the presentations made by the award recipients were among the top three presentations as evaluated by attendees. Award recipients and descriptions of what makes their program special will be described in Spectrum articles in the Spring and Summer issues. For more information on Safe-in-Sound and instructions for nominating a program for future awards, see www.SafeinSound.us.

Domtar Kingsport: Family and Community

The Domtar Pulp and Paper mill in Kingsport, Tennessee views hearing loss prevention and noise control as a family affair. “Not only do we consider our employees as family,” said Debbie Davis, OHC for the Kingsport plant, “but our location in the center of town puts us in the spotlight.”

This physical location and community-centric attitude results in hearing loss prevention emphasis that goes outside the plant gates. James Lankford was part of the Safe-in-Sound team who conducted the plant visit. “Since the plant is close to the Bristol NASCAR track, and many of the workers are active hunters,” he reported, “the ‘whole life’ safety program the plant has adopted is great. The way they address noise exposure outside the workplace and encourage employees to take hearing protection home is a key aspect of their success. The plant has even gone so far as to offer hearing protection to community members who attend the company-sponsored concert series held each summer – what a reflection of their commitment.”

This outreach to the community extends to noise control programs as well. “As we update the physical facility, our management of change process emphasizes reducing the plant noise emissions to the community to the lowest possible levels as well”, said Davis.

The Domtar Kingsport hearing conservation program includes about 325 of the 350 or so employees in the plant. “Our workers are pretty highly mobile, so we include anyone who may work in a noisy area,” Davis said. Union buy-in to hearing conservation and other health and safety programs is very strong, as evidenced by the support of Keith Kiker, union president. Even outside contractors are considered part of the family. Davis participates in the Domtar Kingsport Contractor Safety Partnership, where she has presented on hearing safety to the contractor community, including offering hearing tests. “While they are not in our hearing conservation program,” according to Davis, “by offering them the hearing test, we show our concern for the safety of the contractor community and emphasize the importance we put on hearing health and hearing protection.”

Davis went on, “Personal protective equipment, including hearing protectors, is the last resort for us to protect our employees. Noise control is the top priority, and is included in our management of change process. New equipment and installations are brought in at the lowest possible sound level to make the workplace as safe and healthy as it can be.”

This focus on controls has other benefits. “When the employees see us putting this kind of emphasis on controls, they have less resistance to using hearing protectors in the remaining noisy plant areas. They believe that we want to work with them to protect their hearing, not push PPE to hassle them”, said Davis. “The veteran workers are slow to change, but with the new hires that are coming in as our workforce ages and retires, we see much less resistance to use of hearing protectors and other safety equipment. It helps that we can offer a very wide range of hearing protectors – every employee can find something that works for them, and we are always open to adding new and different types of hearing protectors as employees suggest them.”

Retirees provide an interesting perspective on the Kingsport health and safety programs. “I interview folks as they retire for our plant newsletter”, said Davis, “and ask them about the changes they have seen in the plant during their time with us. The first thing they mention, of course, are the changes in our production equipment and operations, but they never fail to mention changes in safety policies and procedures as well. I recently interviewed a retiree who was hired the year I was born – people stay on these jobs forever!”

Open and ample communication was also cited by the Safe in Sound team as key to the success in Kingsport. An annual safety slogan contest with over 100 entries (from an employee population of about 350), message boards throughout the plant, a new on-line suggestion program, newsletters and more combine to maintain a steady stream of messages about hearing health and safety.

Family, community, and outreach – three keys to the success of hearing loss prevention efforts at Domtar Kingsport. To view Davis’ acceptance presentation from the NHCA conference in Atlanta, log on to <http://www.safeinsound.us/swf/Domtar/index.html>.

Pratt & Whitney East Hartford: Commitment to Quiet

A change in corporate policy led to dramatic changes in the hearing conservation program at Pratt & Whitney East Hartford.

“United Technologies, our parent company, decided to change the exposure at which hearing protection was required from the OSHA-mandated 90 dBA (TWA) to a more protective level of 85 dBA (TWA),” said Mark Skripol, global industrial hygienist for Pratt & Whitney. “Many of our noise sources are in that range, so to avoid adding personal protective equipment (PPE) requirements, we hit the engineering controls hard. Collaboration between our unions,

management, medical and engineering staffs, and others has really made this program work for us.”

Pratt & Whitney starts the process by developing a risk matrix. Existing noise measurements, including area measurements and personal dosimetry, are compiled. The plant is “mapped” for noise, indicating areas where hearing protection is required. The number of workers in each noise area is assessed to help prioritize which noise sources are addressed first. “We use the ‘DIVE’ approach,” said Skripol. “Define the problem, investigate fixes, verify that the control was effective, and ensure that it is maintained.”

“We have completed or are working on between 600 and 700 noise issues in the plant,” according to Skripol. “Our approach has been to use outside expertise when necessary, but use our own Machine Tool Services group, the people who fix and maintain our manufacturing equipment, to learn from the outside help and take on noise control projects themselves.” Many of the control projects include noise barriers such as blankets and curtains. Skripol indicated that “if the design of the controls is managed by the people who are responsible to maintain the machine, there are significant benefits. Machine Services staff learns to make noise control a systematic part of what they do, and the controls are designed to accommodate machine maintenance. These people have learned a lot about noise control and are very proud of the work they do to make our plant a safer place to work.”

This focus on controls soon spread to other aspect of the hearing conservation program. “Part of the problem is that many of our noise sources are intermittent,” said Skripol. “In some of those areas, we use stationary noise measurement equipment that has a fairly large display, and in some cases, is hooked up to lighted signs. That shows people clearly when noise levels are getting hazardous, and gives them a signal that hearing protection is required.” The plant has also

purchased inexpensive noise “pens”, simple measurement devices, for supervisors. This gives them the ability to do quick checks and helps them identify issues that may need the attention of industrial hygiene or engineering staff.

Communication is a key aspect of the program’s success, and is an on-going initiative. “We developed a hearing conservation video featuring our own current and retired workers,” according to Elliot Okren with the communications group at the plant. “Personal testimony is a strong motivator, and it’s very effective for people to hear from their peers about the effects of noise and hearing loss.”

In addition, the plant has developed talking points, for floor supervisors to use as they feature noise and hearing in their regular meetings with their employees. “Constant outreach and communication is critical to our efforts to prevent hearing loss,” said Skripol. “We also feature noise control and hearing conservation in our ‘Shop Talk’ newsletter.”

“It’s important that the employees in the program perceive some sort of benefit from the work that’s being done,” according to Skripol. “As the program progresses, we offer employees custom hearing protectors – or even the elimination of hearing protection requirements – as sort of an incentive to fully participate and support the program.”

Along with revisiting noise controls projects, regular outreach, and moving forward with new control and hearing protection initiatives, Pratt & Whitney East Hartford is promoting their success to other United Technologies divisions and facilities. While the East Hartford plant is large with more than 8500 employees, the lessons of communication, focus on controls, and a systematic approach can be used everywhere. More information on the Pratt & Whitney East Hartford program is available at <http://www.safeinsound.us/swf/P&W/index.html>



“Safe in Sound award winners and committee members recognized at conference”