

Many agricultural workplaces contain spaces that are considered to be “confined” because their configurations hinder the activities of any employees who must enter into, work in and exit from them. In many instances, employees who work in confined spaces also face increased risk of exposure to serious physical injury from hazards such as entrapment, engulfment, and hazardous atmospheric conditions. Confinement itself may pose entrapment hazards, and work in confined spaces may keep employees closer to hazards – such as an asphyxiating atmosphere – than they would be otherwise. For example, confinement, limited access and restricted airflow can result in hazardous conditions that would not arise in an open workplace.



A confined space has limited or restricted means of entry or exit, is large enough for an employee to enter and perform assigned work and is not designed for continuous occupancy by the employee. These spaces may include, but are not limited to, underground vaults, tanks, storage and grain bins, pits and diked areas, vessels and silos.

A tragic type of scenario has plagued farms and ranches with confined spaces. A worker, often a family member, enters a confined space and loses consciousness. A co-worker or family member panics and enters the confined space to rescue them, then also loses consciousness. Another may do the same, then even another. This has happened in sequence for multiple co-workers or family members with many fatalities over the years. This type of scenario can be avoided by the procedures discussed below.

The term “permit-required confined space” (or, permit space) refers to those spaces that meet the definition of a “confined space” and pose additional health or safety hazards, thereby requiring special considerations before entry. The “permit” is a self-issued tool done right at the farm or ranch by management that identifies the control measures to keep entrants safe.

A permit-required confined space is one that meets the definition of a confined space and has one or more of these characteristics:

- Contains or has the potential to contain a hazardous atmosphere.
- Contains a material that has the potential for engulfing an entrant.
- Has an internal configuration that might cause an entrant to be trapped and/or asphyxiated by inwardly converging walls or by a floor that slopes downward and tapers to a smaller cross-section.
- Contains any other recognized serious safety or health hazards.



Special precautions need to be considered before anyone enters a confined space:



PERMIT REQUIREMENTS

In general, employers should evaluate the workplace to determine if spaces are permit-required confined spaces. If there are permit-required spaces, the employer should inform exposed employees of the existence, location and danger posed by the spaces.



RESCUE PLAN

The employer should have a rescue plan including having rescue service personnel outside the confined space and ensure that rescue service personnel are provided with and trained in the proper use of personal protective and rescue equipment.



PROPER TRAINING

The employer should provide proper training for all workers who are required to work in permit spaces.



SAFETY DATA SHEETS

If an injured entrant is exposed to a substance for which a Safety Data Sheet (SDS) or other similar written information is required to be kept at the worksite, that SDS or other written information should be made available to the medical facility treating the exposed entrant.