

How About That GHS?

Does GHS, or “Globally Harmonized System,” mean anything to you? No, it’s not about world music, however every municipal employer needs to be in harmony with GHS in 2013.

GHS is shorthand for the United Nations Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labeling of Chemicals. Yes, **chemicals**. This new international standard has been established through the research and cooperation of several agencies, and the new system will begin to influence U.S. employers in 2013. Implementing GHS involves significant changes to the preexisting OSHA and VOSHA standards on hazardous chemicals. This affects Vermont employers because they must provide updated hazard communication training for their employees.

Any Vermonter who uses hazardous chemicals should already know that the VOSHA Hazard Communication standard (1910.1200, a.k.a. “Hazcom”) requires his or her employer to have a written hazard communication program to make sure that: hazardous chemicals are labeled, employees are trained on the dangers and safe handling requirements of every chemical in use, each chemical’s Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) is printed and placed where employees can easily refer to it, and any visitor to the workplace is aware of potential hazards.

The outgoing system has many shortcomings. For example, MSDSs and container labeling have not been consistent from one manufacturer or distributor to the

next (even for the same chemical), and the MSDSs can be very difficult to read and understand. Moreover, some employers have had an inconsistent or nonexistent hazardous materials program (i.e., policy, practices, and training).

The GHS requires chemical manufacturers and distributors to use standardized formats for container labels and data sheets. Labels will have new elements including pictograms, hazard statements, precautionary statements, and signal words. The old MSDS has been renamed Safety Data Sheet (SDS), a document that will be easier to read and comprehend. OSHA’s intent is to provide a common and coherent approach which will improve the quality and consistency of hazard information in the workplace, making it easier for workers to learn and understand appropriate handling and safe use of hazardous chemicals. All of these changes are also in the updated VOSHA Hazcom standard.

OSHA believes that workplaces will soon begin to receive labels and SDSs that satisfy the GHS standard. Therefore, it is requiring that U.S. employees be trained on the new label elements as well as the SDS format by December 1, 2013. According to the OSHA website, “It is important to ensure that when employees begin to see the new labels and SDSs in their workplaces, they will be familiar with them, understand how to use them, and access the information effectively.”

www.osha.gov/dsg/hazcom/hazcom-faq.html#3

We strongly urge VLCT members to update (or create) their hazard communication program very soon. Begin the process by collecting the new labels and SDSs as soon as they start to arrive from your distributors. **You must train all appropriate employees in the new labels and SDSs before December 1, 2013**, but that is only the start of meeting the new requirements: full compliance with the final rule begins in 2015. This is great opportunity to get a head start on adapting your hazcom program to comply with this regulation. If you do not already have a program in place, contact us to learn exactly what is required and let us guide you through the process. For more information, visit www.osha.gov/dsg/hazcom/ghs.html#1.1 or contact your PACIF loss control consultant.

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