Augusta, Ga. -- Exposing employees to explosion hazards has led to $141,000 in proposed penalties against BP Amoco Polymers, Inc., by the U.S. Labor Department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration. The alleged willful and serious citations for violation of safety standards resulted from an inspection of a March 13 explosion and fire that killed three workers at the company's Clanton Road plant.

OSHA cited BP Amoco for two alleged willful violations with proposed penalties of $125,000 for exposing employees to the release of hazardous energy.

The accident occurred as three workers began removing bolts from a drum in preparation for maintenance and cleaning. Unknown to the men, the drum was overfilled with a polymer salt mixture which continued to react and clogged lines into and out of the vessel, eventually producing an elevated pressure condition inside the drum. Failure to initiate proper lockout/tagout procedures before attempting to remove the bolts from the cover plate contributed to this accident.

In 1990, before operations began at the unit, Amoco studies indicated the need for an effective indicator to measure the amount of mixture in the drum as a protection against hazards caused by overfilling the vessel. An effective device was never installed.

Again in August 2000 after two employees were seriously burned by a hot liquid release, recommendations were made -- but never implemented -- for an operations checklist to verify that vessels were fully drained, depressurized and energy sources disconnected before cleaning and maintenance began.
"This tragedy could have been avoided if the company had adhered to their own internal audit recommendations that improvements were needed in the lockout/tagout program," said William Grimes, OSHA's Atlanta-East area director. "Safety studies have little value if resulting recommendations go unheeded."

The company received three serious citations with proposed penalties totaling $16,000 for failing to: properly install pressure relief devices; require proper face protection for employees working with corrosive materials; and properly train employees on lockout/tagout.

BP Amoco, headquartered in Alpharetta, Ga., is a division of London, England-based British Petroleum. The company, which manufactures plastics materials and resins, has 15 working days to contest OSHA's citations and penalties before the independent Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission.

The inspection was conducted by the Atlanta-East OSHA office located at LaVista Perimeter Office Park, Building 7, Suite 110, Tucker, Ga. 30084-4154; phone: (770) 493-6644.

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