

Global engag

A European programme promoting the safe and responsible handling of isocyanates used in polyurethane foam manufacturing processes has been rolled out to Shell customers globally. Based on industry best practices, it is helping to raise awareness and standards of product stewardship in key developing markets.

The Walk the Talk programme, based on guidelines developed by the European polyurethanes industry body ISOPA, has already proved effective at raising awareness of the hazardous nature of isocyanates among Shell polyols customers in Europe.

Although not produced by Shell, isocyanates such as TDI are used to react with polyols in slabstock foam production. Direct exposure to TDI emissions may cause irritation to the eyes, skin and respiratory system. Prolonged over-exposure can have more serious medical consequences. Handling TDI in line with recommended practices, however, should not pose a hazard to health or environment.

"Through the Walk the Talk initiative ISOPA members have taken information and guidelines for the safe handling of isocyanates to hundreds of users across 27 European countries," explains Mike Jeffs, ISOPA Secretary General. "We believe the benefits of this engagement will come through, with fewer incidents and higher safety standards."

He says ISOPA welcomes the fact that its member companies are now taking the initiative to a wider user base. "This information is relevant beyond the borders of Europe and Shell is at the forefront of expanding the scope of engagement."

Having established a high level of understanding with customers in Europe, attention has turned to developing markets.

"We're using the experience and learnings from the initial rollout to take the programme to a global audience," says Eider Teixeira, Urethane Chemicals



CBP in Brazil has established high standards for mitigating TDI emissions at its manufacturing facilities.

Sales Manager for Latin America.

"Customers in Latin America are not receiving this information from other sources and so appreciate the fact Shell is sharing this knowledge with them, in order that they can fully understand the risks and make sure their people are protected."

CBP of Brazil is one of Shell's major polyols customers in Latin America and a leading foam producer. As a result of Shell's awareness campaign it has been proactive in implementing measures to raise standards for handling TDI.

Guilherme Koury, the company's owner and Marketing Director, says its motive is simple: "Although we employ more than 400 people we are still essentially a family business. We want to look after our people and provide a safe environment for them to work in because they are part of the family and part of our success."

CBP has used the ISOPA guidelines and other support materials provided by Shell to train and inform its workforce, and has invited both customers and other producers to its facilities to demonstrate the measures

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Chemicals Sales Manager for
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it has implemented to manage TDI emissions. "Shell's commitment to sharing its knowledge and experience with us has been key to making this happen," he says.

Kaury believes it is the role of industry leaders to set high standards. "Legislation is not our motivation but it will come one day and so measures put in place now will help prepare us for a more regulated market. If we lead, the industry will start to follow."

RAISING STANDARDS:

Nevertheless, the challenge of raising standards across developing markets is still significant. The lack of a comprehensive regulatory structure combined with rapid economic development in some regions has meant attention to HSSE issues has sometimes been low key.

Shell standards are often still way ahead of local regulations where they exist. Bad practices also tend to be more extreme, including personal protective equipment (PPE) not being worn in foaming areas – leaving workers directly exposed to TDI emissions – and inappropriate use of empty contaminated TDI drums.

"Many problems arise because of low awareness of the hazards of working with TDI amongst smaller companies," explains Ajit Sawhney, Sales Manager for India and the Philippines. "But customers aspire to global HSSE standards even if they are

not there yet, and have responded positively to our approach because they are not getting this support from other suppliers."

As part of Shell's global campaign the ISOPA checklists and guidelines have been translated into a number of additional languages. "Customers are usually surprised but pleased to receive this information from us when we do not even supply the TDI," says Sawhney.

This has been backed up by site visits by Sales and Technical Support staff to go through checklists, provide assessments and present training videos. These visits are targeted at reaching the people actually handling the chemical, as well as engaging with the customer's management team.

"The challenge is often to convince the operational people of the need for mitigation measures. In many countries the absence of PPE is often simply a result of the fact that workers are operating in temperatures of over 40°C," she explains.

Praduman Patel, Joint Managing Director of Sheela Foam and Joyce of Australia – a subsidiary of Sheela Foam, India's largest foam producer – has used personal experience as motivation for implementing high safety standards at the company's facility in New Delhi.

"When I started in this business 30 years ago I was operating machinery and handling foam myself, so I know the

hazards of TDI if the correct procedures and safety equipment are not in place."

Sheela Foam has invested in modern foaming machinery equipped with the latest extraction technology, whilst recognised processes are in place for safe unloading of TDI, dealing with minor spills and for effective drum decontamination.

ALWAYS THINGS TO LEARN

He says Shell's engagement programme has helped to fine-tune its standards and processes. "There are always things to learn and ways to improve and the Shell campaign has helped to raise awareness and bring these issues to the surface.

"As an industry leader it's important for us to take the initiative in health and safety issues, not just for our own reputation but for taking the industry in India forward."

While there is still a long way to go, the global TDI programme has already resulted in noticeable changes in attitude, and greater recognition of the commercial value of a reputation for strong health and safety performance in developing markets.

"Foam producers are increasingly engaged in health and safety initiatives because they not only want to protect their workers but also because they understand the importance of image in gaining the trust of their growing number of potential consumers," says Teixeira.

"They see no reason not to have the same standards as their counterparts in Europe and North America and we are helping them towards that goal."

Personal protective equipment being used during the unloading of TDI from a tanker.



For more information visit:
isopa.org/wallsthetalk