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Complete Health Environmental and Safety Services

MSDS, SDS, GHS means Material Safety Data Sheets Are Obsolete

By Janet Keyes, CIH, CHESS, Inc.

You know what MSDSs are. Your vendors send them to you periodically, you stash them in a big file, and you're never quite sure what to do with them. Except OSHA asks for them if you're inspected. And your hazardous waste inspector asks for specific ones every so often.

They're going away – sort of. In about three years, we won't refer to material safety data sheets, but to safety data sheets (SDS). Some will have a new look. The short ones will be longer. Labels will change, too.

You may have heard something about this and about OSHA's amendment to the Hazard Communication Standard. It hasn't been adopted in Minnesota yet, but we expect it will be soon. Its direct impact on you: not huge.

The changes to data sheets and labels are often referred to as GHS, short for Globally Harmonized System. That's a UN program to make chemical information more consistent around the globe. Instead of the US requiring one type of label and data sheet, Canada another, and the EU yet another, the intent of GHS is to standardize chemical hazard information.

The major changes you'll notice:

- ◆ Nearly all of your material safety data sheets will be altered somewhat. All SDS will be in a 16-part format. Instead of having to dig for the information, major hazards and needed precautions will be included in a section near the top of the SDS.
- ◆ Labels will include pictograms, to quickly convey the type of hazard.

There are other changes, but many have already been implemented by manufacturers or they won't be as noticeable. You won't see the signal word "caution" used anymore. Chemicals with flash points above 100°F but below 200°F were called combustible under the old standard; they will be classified as flammable under the new standard. Percentages of hazardous ingredients now need to be listed, unless they're a trade secret.

Minnesota has to either adopt the federal standard by fall 2012 (roughly by November), or has to prove that its Right to Know law is as effective as the federal Hazard Communication standard. There are some major differences between Right to Know and the federal standard. Minnesota's standard covers biological and physical hazards, such as heat and noise – the federal standard does not. And Minnesota requires annual refresher training. We expect those requirements to stay the same, with Minnesota adopting the parts of the standard that pertain to labels and safety data sheets.

What do you need to do now? Start training employees on the new information, especially the meaning of the pictograms, which is the biggest change. Employees should recognize most of the pictograms as they are very similar to the symbols now used on DOT labels and placards.

The federal standard requires that employee training be done by December 1, 2013, although that date may be extended by six months in Minnesota.

Expect to receive a lot of new safety data sheets. You can still keep them electronically, as long as employees have ready access to them and can get a hard copy within a day.

Once more information is available on what action Minnesota OSHA is taking, you will need to update your Right to Know program. Watch this column for more updates in the next six months.

If you have questions about hazard communication, Right to Know, OSHA standards, or other safety issues, contact CHESS at 651-481-9787; toll free at 877-482-4377, or carkey@chess-safety.com.

This article is intended to provide general information (not advice) about current safety topics. To discuss your specific concerns and how CHESS may help, please contact CHESS at 651-481-9787 or chess@chess-safety.com.

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