

Ethics for the Occupational Health and Safety Professional

Case Study Number One

Kudochem is a multinational company producing chemicals for the agricultural industry.

Kudochem's researchers believe – but cannot prove – that there is a risk related to a production technique for fertilizer. This technique is used in all 17 of Kudochem's plants worldwide. If unaddressed, this new risk might cause a major explosion with multiple fatalities. But that is just a theory with an estimated frequency of actually causing an explosion of once every 100 years across all plants.

It is possible to run tests to prove or disprove the impact of the contributing cause, but the tests would take 5 months to complete. All of the plants run continuously; there is no “downtime”. Your engineers have told you that, without more information (which will take 5 months to get), there is no repair they can do to reduce the risk of an explosion.

Twelve of the 17 plants are old and any shutdown for any reason – even to install equipment to prevent the explosions - is not financially viable. Thus, those plants would close permanently if you shut them down while you performed your tests. Those older plants are in poorer countries with no employment insurance or welfare systems. Thus, 18 500 staff would lose their jobs in those areas. While you can provide “transition support” for laid off staff, you cannot afford to do so for more than one year. After that year, having no other “safety net” and little chance for other employment, most of the staff in poorer countries and their families would likely fall into extreme poverty. Statistically speaking, 47.3% of persons living in extreme poverty die 15 to 20 years earlier than others in the same country.

Put yourself in the place of Kudochem's president. While doing the 5-month long tests to confirm or refute the theory about the risk, do you:

- leave the plants running and run the risk of an explosion?
- shut them down now, knowing that the older plants will never reopen?

Why?

Please do not propose compromise solutions, like close some plants, switch production, etc. To get the most out of this case study, look at it as an all or nothing situation – either all plants stay open for the 5-month long test or all plants close during the 5-month test (recognizing that, if closed during the tests, 12 of the 17 plants will never be able to reopen).

