



Sonoco West Chicago Team Achieves One Million Injury-Free Hours

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WEST CHICAGO, Jan. 21 /PRNewswire/ -- April 1, 1992 is a date everyone at the Sonoco composite can manufacturing plant here remembers. That is the last day an employee was injured on the job. Since then -- more than seven-and-a-half years, 2.3 billion composite cans and one million work hours later -- the entire team has remained injury-free. That is the equivalent of one person working 500 years without an injury.

To commemorate the West Chicago plant's safety achievement, Sonoco president and chief executive officer Peter Browning and other company leaders will join the employee team on Fri., Jan. 21 for a host of activities celebrating their world-class safety milestone. "A strong safety record indicates a work environment and people-oriented culture where individuals actively demonstrate their concern for one another," Browning said. "This has been the basis of Sonoco's success in the past and it will be the basis for our continued success in the future."

All of the employees are excited about Browning's first visit to the plant, says Julie Michalak, sales correspondent and coordinator of the team planning the celebration. "Employees will have many opportunities to interact with Sonoco senior managers. They will discuss our safety program and what we've done to make it work." The West Chicago plant manufactures composite canisters used to package frozen concentrate, snacks, nuts, powdered food and beverages as well as other non-food stuffs.

Last year was an exceptional year for the facility, as new business boosted production by 22 percent. Plant manager Steve Lutes says this growth, coupled with a robust economy, made it difficult to staff the manufacturing operations. "We faced some extraordinary challenges during 1999," he says. "We had a lot of new employees, significant overtime and numerous job vacancies. We also introduced a completely new manufacturing line with different technology. All of those factors can weigh heavily on a safety program when you have a three-shift, seven days-per-week operation."

The pride in Lutes' voice is obvious when he describes the positive attitude of the 67-member team at the West Chicago plant. "Our employees have what I consider to be three key ingredients for success: knowledge, experience and concern. They care about their work and each other," he says. "This is one of the best workforces I've been associated with during my career at Sonoco. We all work together as a team."

Everyone at the plant readily acknowledges the reason for this success story is due to a long-standing Sonoco philosophy: Safety is the number one priority. Every employee willingly assumes responsibility for their own safety and the safety of their co-workers. "We all look out for each other," explains John Lyon, a materials coordinator with 24 years of service with the plant, and a member of the safety committee. "I know something could happen to me, and I will do everything in my power to make sure I work safely and that others around me work safely too."

Zachary Neff, quality systems/process improvement manager and plant safety coordinator, notes that one of the key factors in remaining injury-free is the support from the top. "We are given the resources to do what needs to be done. No one is afraid to tell someone else there is a safer way," he adds.

Finding a safer way to do the job is one of many topics addressed by the plant safety committee. Comprised of volunteers, the committee shares information on issues related to jobs, production and maintenance. Opportunities exist for employees to volunteer for audits, inspections or participate on the plant's emergency response team. In addition to monthly plant meetings, shifts hold regular meetings to proactively talk about safety. Special initiatives -- such as this year's forklift/pedestrian safety, electrical work practices and development of a safety index -- provide detailed focus on key division-wide topics.

One of the best tools used by Sonoco, says Neff, is the job safety analysis (JSA). It is a written document that describes the safe way to perform every task for each job in the plant. Another is sharing best practices among plants. After once having one of the worst safety records, the West Chicago facility is now recognized as being one of the top performers in Sonoco's consumer products division.

"We've come a long way," says winder operator Will Riley. Throughout his 18 years at the plant, he's been a part of the progress made in the area of safety. Wisely, Riley remains cautiously optimistic. "We've made a great step forward, but we need to keep going further. We've got a lot of work to do to remain injury-free."

Winder operator John Mayhan agrees with his co-workers. Since Sonoco acquired the plant from Boise Cascade in 1987, people became more conscious of their actions. "When I started working here 24 years ago, we didn't wear safety glasses, hearing protection or safety shoes. Even the machines didn't have guards. Those days are long gone. We even take our safety practices home with us," he observes.

Employee-driven safety programs are successful throughout Sonoco, a \$2.6 billion Fortune 600, global packaging company headquartered in Hartsville, S.C. The company provides industrial and consumer packaging products and services to some of the world's largest businesses. Sonoco has been recognized throughout the industry for its outstanding safety record. Many of Sonoco's 275 operations worldwide have received safety awards from the American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA), the British Safety Council and various states and governments.

With a passion for safety matched only by the company's passion for profitable growth, Sonoco's 17,000 team members have made tremendous steps toward achieving their goal of zero injuries. Since 1980, Sonoco's injury rate has decreased by approximately 87%.

Now that the one million milestone has been reached, awareness has kicked up another notch. "Every single person in this plant contributed to our record," says Sandra Burfield, a quality system technician with 13 years of service. "I will continue to contribute by making sure I work safely every day."

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