

HAZARDOUS SUBSTANCES

- NEW HAZARD CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM



If you are one of the thousands of Kiwi businesses that works with hazardous substances, keeping your people safe is about to get a whole lot simpler.

From April 30, the current hazard classification system HSNO will be replaced by GHS 7, the Globally Harmonised System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals. Created by the United Nations, GHS is an internationally agreed system that hopes to eventually supersede the diverse classification and labelling standards used in different countries.

Implemented by New Zealand's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the new system will better align New Zealand with its global trading partners (including Australia), and even more importantly, improve workplace safety.

It's a big change, but according to Pieter Van Vuuren, Health & Safety Training Professional at Safety 'n Action, the new classification system will bring New Zealand businesses - and workers - a whole host of benefits.

"GHS is simpler, easier to understand, and much more user-friendly. With HSNO, classifications are based around numbers and letters, whereas GHS uses pictures and words," says Pieter.

This example shows the HSNO symbol for flammable liquid.



Meanwhile, below is the GHS version for the same substance. Not only does it clearly show it's a flammable liquid, but it also immediately lets people know it is ecotoxic and a health hazard.



"I think GHS helps get the message through more clearly, giving people a better understanding of what hazards they are being exposed to in their workplace. With HSNO if you don't know what the numbers mean, you won't fully understand the dangers of a particular chemical or hazardous substance. GHS provides better information in terms of the potential adverse effects that a hazardous substance can cause."

That's good news for everyone from nail technicians, school caretakers and swimming pool maintenance people right through to those working in the most highly hazardous sectors.

"A huge number of businesses will be impacted by these changes. Basically, anyone who handles hazardous substances needs to know about it."

Under Regulation 9 of the Health and Safety at Work (General Risk and Workplace Management) Regulation 2016, employers are duty-bound to ensure that all their workers have the new hazardous substances information, supervision and training relevant to their roles.

"Most businesses have some form of hazardous substances in their workplace. It could be something as simple as petrol they use to fill up generators all the way through to people who use toxic fumigants and pesticides."

But not all workers will need to be upskilled to the same level.

"If you are working in a warehouse and the most hazardous work you may ever need to do is clean up a spill of Sunlight liquid, you don't need to complete in depth training on toxic fumigants and explosives."

That's why Safety 'n Action, New Zealand's leading health and safety training provider, is offering four different levels of training to keep New Zealand's diverse workforce abreast of the new classification changes - from a hazardous substances in the workplace seminar for entry level workers, right through to a preparation for certified handler course for those handling the most hazardous and toxic substances.

As Pieter points out, many will already be vaguely familiar with GHS - it has been a part of the system in New Zealand for some time, but until now, never fully adopted. (For example, if you went into a filling station today, you would likely see both HSNO and GHS labelling.)

GHS breaks hazardous substances down into three main categories - environmental, physical and health. Hazards are communicated on labels and safety data sheets, and include information about the safe way to store, use and dispose of chemicals. In the long-term it is hoped the GHS will help boost people's knowledge of the chronic health hazards of chemicals, and ultimately aid in the elimination or replacement of such substances.

With the new EPA notice coming in at the end of this month, employers will need to upskill their teams to an appropriate level in order to comply (although EPA has assured businesses there will be a grace period to give everyone time to complete any necessary training). Importers and manufacturers will also need to ensure that their products meet the requirements of the EPA notices for labelling,

So, what will be some of the challenges workplaces face as they transition over to the new system?

Pieter says that will depend largely on the business itself. But given the fact that one in three New Zealand businesses either manufactures, uses, handles or stores hazardous substances, employers nationwide will need to upskill their staff in order to meet their legislative requirements.

Keen to find out more about what the introduction of GHS will mean for you and your organisation?

For the full EPA notice go to:

<https://www.epa.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Documents/Hazardous-Substances/EPA-Notices/hazardous-substances-hazard-classification-notice-2020-oct20.pdf>