

THOMSON BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE

Restaurants change CO2 systems after fatal gas leak

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By Gary Taylor

Feb. 12--Until two workers were found dead a month ago inside a **Sanford** McDonald's, **carbon dioxide** was seen as a harmless gas consumed daily by millions of people as the fizz in their soft drinks.

Indeed, little is done to regulate its use or the pressurized tanks that are filled with the stuff and found in virtually every restaurant and convenience store.

But the two deaths show the gas can turn lethal if inhaled. And operators of some Central Florida restaurants, including McDonald's and Checker's, are now rushing to eliminate potentially the most dangerous environment for **carbon dioxide** -- confined spaces where the gas is delivered.

Titan Holdings, which operates 19 Checker's restaurants in Central Florida, is retrofitting its outlets with exterior, rather than interior, CO2 connections.

The company took action, said Titan Chief Operating Officer Kathleen Driggers, after learning of the deaths in **Sanford**.

"It [inside delivery] had never come up as an issue," Driggers said.

All of Titan's 62 restaurants in Florida and Alabama are being checked, she said. Of those in Central Florida, outlets at 6371 W. Colonial Drive and 7604 E. Colonial Drive were the only ones without external connections, Driggers said. "They are our two oldest stores."

Driggers said she expects work on those two sites to be completed soon. However, Checker's supplier, NuCO2 of Stuart, has them on a waiting list.

NuCO2 is the company that services the McDonald's in **Sanford** and most fast-food outlets in Central Florida.

"They told us we are one of many they are doing in the area," Driggers said.

It's unclear how many restaurants are equipped with interior fill "bibs" for **carbon dioxide**. Representatives for Wendy's and Burger King said all of their restaurants have the bibs on the outside.

NuCO2 officials would not discuss any changes being made at restaurants, except to say the company has an ongoing program to evaluate its **carbon-dioxide** delivery systems.

"We don't feel it's appropriate to comment on the specifics of our customers' sites," spokesman Steven Anreder said.

NuCO2 delivery driver George Torres, 49, of Apopka was killed in the Jan. 8 accident at the **Sanford** McDonald's, on U.S. Highway 17-92 near Lake Mary Boulevard. McDonald's employee Christopher Edgar, 18, died the next day.

The **Sanford** restaurant originally had an outside connection, but a children's play area was built and the delivery bib was placed in a walled-off room with a door leading outside the building.

A McDonald's at 11382 S. U.S. Highway 441 in Orlando also ended up with an internal connection because a play area was added.

Those were the only two McDonald's of 171 in Central Florida that did not have outside connections -- and both have since been changed, a McDonald's official said.

In a written statement, McDonald's regional marketing manager Beth Plotkin said the company rushed to make the changes "to ensure the safety of our employees and customers."

Officials think Edgar scaled the wall after the door was found locked and no one had a key. Torres apparently passed the hose over the wall to Edgar, and then also climbed over the wall.

The accident is under investigation by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Forcing CO2 drivers to enter a confined space to make a delivery "is very dangerous," said Dr. Lisa G. Benaise, an official of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, a research branch of the Centers for Disease Control.

The safest way to deliver **carbon dioxide** is through a connection on the outside of the building, but there are no rules requiring that, Benaise said.

Often, where a delivery has to be done inside a building, "there's one way to get in and one way to get out," Benaise said. "When there's **carbon dioxide** in an enclosed space, that's very dangerous."

Carbon dioxide gas is noncombustible, colorless, tasteless and odorless. It is heavier than air and displaces oxygen. Overexposure is described as drowning without water.

Drivers frequently inhale small amounts of **carbon dioxide**, said Jim Lampa, who has worked as a delivery driver for NuCO2 for about five years. "Every time we disconnect [the delivery hose], we breathe it," he said.

Sometimes, it's more than a whiff.

"The first time it happened to me, I panicked," Lampa said. "You can't gasp."

Although there is **carbon dioxide** in the atmosphere, even a 2 percent concentration can cause health problems, Benaise said. "If it [concentration] is really, really high, it can kill you in a short period of time." Unconsciousness, and death, can occur in a matter of seconds.

In Florida, the regulation of restaurants is left up to the Department of Business and Professional Regulation's Division of Hotels and Restaurants.

But inspectors deal only with small cylinders of CO2 that typically hold 20 to 50 pounds of the gas, not the large tanks that are filled with hoses from delivery trucks and can hold from 100 to 750 pounds of the gas, said Geoff Luebke, division director.

And the concern is not about leakage.

The smaller cylinders are checked to ensure that they are chained and can't fall over, Luebke said. If one of the high-pressure tanks fell and the valve was knocked off, it could "become a deadly projectile," he said.

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Sanford, Fla.--The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration is investigating the deaths here of an 18-year-old McDonald's worker and a truck driver from carbon-dioxide poisoning.(Just In)(Brief Article)

Nation's Restaurant News Daily NewsFax, Vol. 12, Issue. 17, p 1(1)

01-26-2005

SANFORD, Fla. -- The U.S. OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH ADMINISTRATION is investigating the deaths here of an 18-year-old MCDONALD'S worker and a truck driver from **carbon-dioxide** poisoning. The accident occurred inside a room where tanks of the gas to carbonate beverages are stored at the McDonald's restaurant, according to a published report. Oak Brook, Ill.-based McDonald's Corp. did not return phone calls seeking comment.

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TOXIC GAS KILLS SECOND WORKER

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01-11-2005

By Associated Press

SANFORD

A McDonald's worker died Sunday, a day after a truck driver suffocated when **carbon dioxide** leaked while they tried to refill a tank at a Central Florida fast-food restaurant.

Christopher Edgar, 18, died at Central Florida Regional Hospital in **Sanford**, police investigator Steven Vazquez said.

Delivery truck driver George Torres, 49, of Apopka, died of **carbon-dioxide** poisoning Saturday afternoon in the **Sanford** restaurant's storage room.

Edgar climbed a 10-foot wall to get into the storage room to unlock the door from the inside so Torres could refill the tank, investigators said.

The gas is used to carbonate soft drinks.

Edgar could not open the door, so Torres then fed the hose over the wall, Vazquez told the Orlando Sentinel.

Investigators think Torres climbed in to help, but also became trapped in the room, which has no ceiling.

No one at the restaurant had the key to the door, Vazquez said.

A manager brought the key from home after another employee climbed a ladder, found the two unconscious and called police.

Torres worked for NuCO₂, which is based in Stuart.

Michael E. DeDomenico, NuCO2 chairman and CEO, said Torres was with the company for three years and had an excellent safety record.

He said Torres was making a regular delivery of **carbon dioxide**.

``We really don't have the level of information to ascertain what happened," DeDomenico said.
``We never want to let this happen again."

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration was investigating.

Sanford is 19 miles north of Orlando.

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