

Late Night Call to Spill Center Means Trouble

HUDSON, Mass., Nov. 16, 2010 – Calvin Teixeira's phone rang just before 2 a.m. in the small Massachusetts town of Hudson, 30 miles west of Boston. He was working the night shift at Spill Center, a 20-year-old company that manages environmental spills of hazardous materials and other regulated substances that pose a risk and require immediate cleanup. On the other end of the line was a client, a trucking company based in northwest Ohio. One of its tank trucks carrying a hazardous waste solution of hydrochloric acid had rolled over on the Ohio Turnpike in the town of Streetsboro.

About half of the tanker's 3,900 gallons of the toxic solution had spilled into a ditch beside the road, according to the Highway Patrol. Troopers shut down the highway and ordered residents of 20 homes in the vicinity to evacuate. The truck's driver, who was taken to a hospital with non-life-threatening injuries, may have fallen asleep at the wheel, police said. A wrecker was on scene to pull the overturned tanker back upright.

The trucking company manager made the call to Spill Center after he received word of the accident by police on scene. They wanted to know how it would be handled. Teixeira, a Spill Center compliance associate, spoke briefly with the manager, taking down the location, material spilled, amount and other details. The manager wanted Spill Center to get a cleanup contractor to the site, one with a vacuum truck that could off-load product and suck up spilled acid. He also wanted Spill Center to make all the incident reports to local, state and federal authorities.

Tom Moses, president of Spill Center, started the company more than 20 years ago on the premise that most carriers need assistance in dealing with the "maze of government regulations" and reporting requirements surrounding hazmat spills. A former U.S. EPA toxicologist, Moses received his law degree in 1986 and holds a certificate in Hazardous Materials Control and Emergency Response from the Georgia Institute of Technology. He started Spill Center to help level the playing field for clients involved in environmental releases requiring cleanup, he noted.

"Spill generators often get so caught up in the rush to clean up a spill that they slip up on the reporting side," Moses noted. "We offer comprehensive spill reporting services for jurisdictions throughout the U.S. and much of Canada to help clients avoid fines and penalties for missing reporting deadlines and other compliance issues."

After Teixeira hung up the phone, he pulled up the client's pre-filed spill contingency plan. It contains contact information on the company, preferred contractors and other details he needed to manage the incident, Moses related.

Spill Center maintains information on over 3,000 cleanup contractors qualified to handle hazmat spills throughout North America. Teixeira contacted Sunpro, a contractor in North Canton, Ohio, which offers 24/7 emergency spill response and remediation services for hazardous releases. A crew would be there with the right equipment within two hours, he said.

Teixeira next used Spill Center's database to determine which agencies needed reports. He reviewed the regulations covering acid spills in the jurisdictions involved. There was little time to waste. Some jurisdictions have a very tight deadline for phoning in spills before incurring a fine for late reporting. In Massachusetts, the window is only two hours after the spill occurs.

The agency search went quickly. Requirements of some 30,000 jurisdictions are in the Spill Center database. The DOT required a report since it involved a highway closure. The acid went into a ditch and could impact water, triggering a report to the National Response Center (NRC). Teixeira called in reports to the Ohio EPA, local Emergency Planning Committee, Ohio Emergency Management Agency and the NRC. He also called the on-scene trooper in charge to inform him that Spill Center was managing the response on behalf of the carrier and a cleanup contractor was on the way.

“The contractor called me once he arrived on scene; then I updated our client,” related Teixeira. “Sunpro had a four-man crew at the site, with another four-man crew coming with roll-off boxes to hold contaminated soil, absorbent pads and other solid waste. They had to excavate the soil, replace it with clean soil and lay sod,” he said. The crews, working at the direction of the EPA, generated 30 full roll-off boxes, each with about 15 tons of soil and waste, noted Teixeira.

The contractor called Teixeira several times with updates, reporting on the scope of work, disposal plans and follow-up testing of the soil. At each step, Teixeira notified the client. By the start of the day shift, Teixeira was ready to hand the case over to another compliance associate, who would send out letters and written reports to the regulatory agencies that require them. Follow-up documentation would also be handled by Spill Center. All spill-related invoices would come to Spill Center to be audited for accuracy.

“That was just another day at Spill Center,” observed Moses, who also represents clients at legal proceedings related to environmental claims. “Clients know that no phone goes unanswered here, even on holidays and weekends. And when it rings in the middle of the night, we have a pretty good idea of what’s in store for us.”