

# Absorbing practice

Staying on the right side of the law might mean paying more attention to absorbents, spill kits and the professional services around them to prevent problems. Brian Wall reports

Many plants that are reactive when dealing with spills – meaning after the event, so, by definition, too late – should have been proactive. They should have ensured that they already had the requisite equipment, backed by appropriate procedures, on site. The tools are there to make this happen; the technical help and advice is in abundant supply; and, more often than not, it's free.

Not only that, says Adrian Tilley, director of Serpro – a supplier of workshop consumables, industrial absorbents and spill management products – but employee training is also available from many sources, including his own company. What's more, many firms will prepare site reports; risk analysis is readily to hand; and the products to prevent a situation going from bad to worse, and possibly even prosecution, are within easy reach.

Yet there are still some plant managers who fail to deal with the risks of spills. "I get calls from buyers and, in many cases, it is with a heavy sigh, along the lines: 'I've just had a health and safety inspection and I've been told that I need to get...' etc. Hardly ever

do they say, 'This is a good idea. I should have had these before; This would have solved my problem ages ago; I wouldn't have been sued by a claims company for someone falling on an oily floor; I wouldn't have been taken to court by the Environment Agency for leaking fuel into a river'."

Tilley insists that spending a relatively small amount now could save a fortune in the future. And he adds that the majority of plants, medium-to-larger size in particular, take their corporate responsibilities and legal obligations very seriously.

"However, we still find that, with many smaller plants, there is, on occasion, a complete ignorance of the Environment Agency's extensive guidance notes and oil storage regulations. Suffice to say, I wonder if it's a case sometimes of hoping potential problem won't happen. But I do also feel that, quite often, it's a matter of resistance to change: 'We've always done it this way, why should we do it any other?' In most instances, the 'always done it this way...' really means 'we've always done nothing and are going to continue to do nothing, if we can get away with it'."

## Cost of going green

Price, too, seems to militate against putting the right systems in place. Tilley recalls phone conversations with buyers who want to use absorbent pads that must be 'eco' friendly, to fit with their plant's carbon reduction policies. "However, some then refuse to buy them, because of the higher cost. Until now, low carbon footprint products in our industry have carried a surcharge, mainly because they are made abroad, so transport costs push prices up."

That said, he accepts that claiming eco-friendliness for products made abroad is a bit of a stretch, given the high carbon footprint of transport. "We've been pushing this issue with one of our suppliers and they have now started manufacturing an 'eco' recycled absorbent pad in the UK, with a carbon footprint that couldn't get any lower. Also, the price will be the lowest possible."

Tilley concedes that some of his views may be controversial, but points out that those plant managers who do not respond positively to their legal and corporate obligations are only storing up problems for themselves in the future. "Prosecutions are a reality. You only have to look on the Environment Agency's website to see this. Those who do nothing are living under a false sense of security." **FE**

**Adrian Tilley, director of Serpro: plants need equipment, backed by appropriate procedures, ready for use on site**

