

Three Florida construction workers killed on the job

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Three Key Largo, Florida construction workers died Monday morning when they were exposed to a poisonous mixture of hydrogen sulfide and methane gas.

The three men, Elway Gray, 34, of Fort Lauderdale, Louis O'Keefe, 49, of Little Torch Key and Robert Wilson, 24, of Summerland Key, had noticed a dip in a recently paved road and removed a nearby manhole cover over a drainage ditch to investigate the cause of the irregularity. After the first man entered the fifteen-foot-deep hole and went silent, the second and then the third man entered the hole to rescue their co-workers and both succumbed to the deadly fumes.

The men were not equipped with the air packs and gas masks that could have saved their lives.

A volunteer firefighter responding to the emergency call, Leonardo Moreno, entered the hole without an air tank due to the cramped conditions and was immediately rendered unconscious. He was rescued by another firefighter, who had to remove his air tank and carry it between his legs in order to descend into the narrow hole. Moreno was airlifted to a nearby hospital and is currently in critical condition.

A fourth worker as well as three Monroe County sheriff's deputies were also treated for dizziness resulting from exposure to the gas.

Nearby neighborhood homes were subsequently evacuated while the area was investigated by a Miami-Dade Hazmat team. The Hazmat team found high concentrations of methane and hydrogen sulfide and very low levels of oxygen in the pipe.

The cause of the gas was said to be a year's long buildup of rotting vegetation at the bottom of the drainage ditch. The three men had been called out to respond to reports of a sewage back-up in the area.

A resident of the area, Barbara Guerra, told Local 10

News that the neighborhood had smelled of sulfur for some time, "It smells like rotten eggs ... It was out here again this morning and I'm used to it because they've been a whole year already."

Monroe County Sheriff Rick Ramsey told the *Miami Herald* that the drainage hole lacked the proper ventilation to prevent the build-up of gasses. "Generally, you want to ventilate the tube out before you go in there and have proper breathing stuff. It appears there was no venting done prior. The best we can see at this time, there was no pre-venting going in and obviously going into a contained space like this where there's no gasses, it can be deadly as we saw today," said Ramsay.

The deaths are being investigated by both Monroe County detectives and the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Companies that perform work in confined spaces, such as sewers and drainage ditches, are required by law to abide by OSHA's Confined Space Standard. This includes performing atmospheric tests prior to entry, providing adequate safety equipment and training for employees engaged in such work, and having a rescue team on site if the work is deemed dangerous.

OSHA also requires that a company supervisor be present to monitor compliance with these regulations. It is unknown at this time why none of these protocols were observed.

The three men were not employees of the Key Largo Wastewater Treatment District which controls the drainage ditch, but rather worked for Douglas N. Higgins, a private contractor retained by the county to do roadwork.

The company, based in Michigan, is currently involved in seventeen projects throughout Florida, three of them in the Keys.

The company had previously received a citation from OSHA in 2002 related to work done on a Marco Island manhole. The *Miami Herald* reports that "The citation said, among other violations, that atmospheric testing wasn't performed; a confined space entry program wasn't implemented; confined space entry permits weren't implemented by a qualified person; a rescue plan wasn't implemented; rescue services weren't available in a timely manner; and rescue equipment wasn't available at the site."

The company was charged \$2,500 for the violations, a fine that was later reduced to \$1,875.

A 2016 report from the AFL-CIO states that in 2014, 4,821 workers were killed on the job in the United States. An estimated 50,000 additional workers died that year from "occupational diseases". Added together this averages out to 150 workers dying every day.

The report also noted the critical lack of funding for workplace inspections: "Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) resources are still too few and declining with only 1,840 federal and state inspectors to inspect 8 million workplaces. This means there are enough inspectors for federal OSHA to inspect workplaces once every 145 years, on average, and state OSHA plans have enough to inspect workplaces once every 97 years."



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