

# SAFETY NOTES

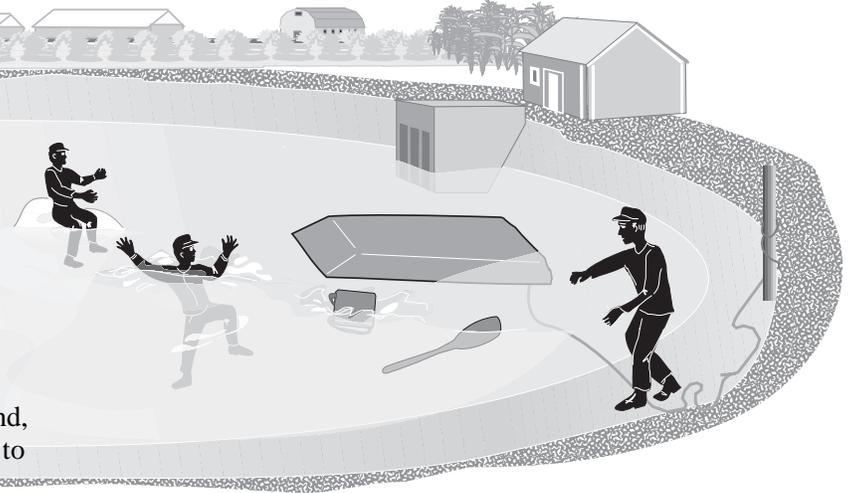
Department of Consumer & Business Services  
Oregon Occupational Safety & Health Division  
Salem, OR 97310

## Fatality Report

Accident type ..... Drowning  
Industry ..... Agricultural nursery  
Employee job title ..... Laborer

### Description of accident

At a large nursery, three workers were sent to an irrigation pond to deal with an air bubble in a pond liner that had bulged the liner to the top of the water. The men loaded four sandbags, weighing approximately 90 pounds each, into a 12-foot aluminum boat that was tethered to a metal pole on the bank. Two of the men then got into the boat and paddled into the middle of the pond, using an oar and a shovel. On the first trip, the two workers were unsuccessful at causing the bubble to deflate and allow the liner to sink to the bottom of the pond, as the sandbags slid off the bubble. They returned to shore for four more sandbags. The third man, the supervisor, remained on the bank both times.



One of the men got out of the boat onto the bubble and the other began handing sandbags to him. The man in the boat yelled that the boat was taking on water. The supervisor immediately began pulling the boat back to shore, but the worker in the boat jumped overboard. None of the three knew how to swim and although the victim was thrown a Type IV flotation device, he was not able to reach it. The victim sank, resurfaced once, was unable to grab a nylon rope thrown to him by the supervisor on the bank, and sank again. The supervisor radioed the main office for assistance, and other workers, hearing the call for help, rushed to the pond. Two workers dove into the pond to retrieve the victim, but were unable to find him. By the time the nearest water-rescue team arrived, the victim had been under 14 feet of water for about 30 minutes. Upon retrieval, he was declared dead.

### Investigation findings

The employer had not conducted a hazard assessment of the task to which these workers were set. The same crew had previously been sent on similar assignments without life preservers. The workers had not been asked by their supervisor if they could swim. There was a language barrier between workers and their supervisor. The boat used by the workers did not specify capacity, but investigation showed that similar craft have 600-pound capacities. With the sandbags and the two men, the boat was carrying approximately 784 pounds. There was no back-up boat or other means to quickly retrieve anyone who fell into the pond. A similar accident, with no injuries, in which the boat sank in shallower water, had been witnessed by the supervisor a week before this fatality, but the supervisor had not conducted an investigation or made any changes to procedure, except to tell workers not to fill sandbags so full. The boat was not properly equipped with oars, even though the supervisor knew that one of the oars had been missing since the winter before the accident.

### To prevent similar accidents

- Conduct hazard assessments and have appropriate rescue plans for all tasks that workers may be required to do, even if the tasks may not be conducted on a regular basis.
- Train workers for the tasks they are assigned to do, and assign tasks according to knowledge, skills, and abilities.
- Equip workers properly for the tasks they are assigned to do.
- Empower workers to speak up about unsafe conditions and to suggest remedies to workplace hazards through safety committees.
- Ensure that language barriers do not get in the way of safe work practices.

### Applicable standards

ORS 654.010