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Proposed Changes to
“Intrinsically Safe” Radio Equipment
Impacts Oil and Gas Industry, Utilities

Factory Mutual’s proposed changes for intrinsically safe radio equipment standards, if adopted, would have a significant impact on the oil and gas industry and electric utilities.

Intrinsically safe (“IS”) radio equipment is designed for use in dangerous work environments, like refineries and other large industrial settings. IS equipment is important for critical infrastructure organizations and public safety entities that need to ensure their responders, who may be working in hazardous, explosive or volatile conditions, are carrying equipment that will operate at frequencies and power levels that will not increase the danger already inherent in their surroundings. IS equipment is designed to emit low temperatures and give off no sparks.

The recent controversy over IS equipment standards stems from Factory Mutual’s decision to adopt new regulations for IS devices as part of its “FM Approved” third-party certification process; specifically, their 3610 standard for two-way radios. The new standard adopts regulations from the American National Standards Institute (“ANSI”) and the International Society of Automation (“ISA”). The proposed regulations would mandate a significant decrease in the power levels at which IS devices may operate.

Several industry groups have fought the proposed changes for a number of reasons. Many in the industry consider the new standard superfluous, as the current standards are already successful in safeguarding users of IS mobile equipment. The rationale given by Factory Mutual for making the changes is to bring American standards in line with the standards in place for European IS devices. Industry leaders, however, say the American standards are already succeeding in their goals.

Critics of the proposed changes also note the exceedingly short deadline by which the standards would be implemented. Factory Mutual has set a January 1, 2012 date for implementing the new regulations. No current equipment is available in the United States that meets Factory Mutual’s proposed standards. Given the massive overhaul required and the brief period of time remaining to make current systems conform to the new standard, industry groups believe the switchover will be nearly impossible.

The reduction in power for IS devices also would significantly decrease coverage – by some estimates, up to 40 percent – of current systems. The power reduction would require additional sites merely to maintain existing coverage levels.

The problem is compounded by the Federal Communications Commission’s mandate to move existing radio equipment to narrowband technology by 2013. Suitable equipment may not be available that meets both the FCC’s narrowband standard as well as FM’s proposed new IS standard.

Thankfully, in response to complaints, Factory Mutual has solicited additional input from affected radio users. Many licensees have responded. If your company will be impacted by the new changes, the deadline is fast approaching. Now is the time to make your voices heard.

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