How to identify airborne contaminants in agriculture

Mouldy grain in a silo

Maria owns the Central Wheat and Canola Farm, which is a medium sized farm employing 50 workers, plus up to 40 seasonal workers during peak harvest times. As the person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU), Maria has a duty under work health and safety (WHS) laws to keep her workers safe from hazards.

Maria regularly inspects the farm grounds, sheds, and silos to identify potential hazards to her workers. She also regularly talks to and consults with her workers regarding their work practices which can help identify hazards.

Look at your workplace

During one inspection, after a period of wet weather, one of her workers let her know that there was a crack near the top of the silo that was letting rainwater in. On further investigation, Maria found that the seeping water created mould and spoiled the top part of the grain harvest.

Talk and consult with your workers

This silo was soon to be emptied for transport and Maria knew she needed to protect her workers from breathing in the grain dust. Thanks to the report from her worker, Maria had also identified that when emptying the silo, the mould could release spores and toxins that could be hazardous to her workers' health if breathed in.

Maria spoke with all her workers and together they planned how to empty the grain silo safely. Maria also checked that all her workers had the right respiratory protection equipment (RPE) for the task. Maria's workers had already received training in RPE and how to wear it to protect themselves from hazards.

Reassess

Once the silo was emptied and repaired, Maria reviewed her control measures and upgraded her mechanical ventilation and moisture monitoring system to prevent the grain from spoiling again. She worked closely with her workers to develop a process to check the new control measures and provided her workers with training on how to use them.