



## OSHA has fined Lincoln company multiple times

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**By Karen Lee Ziner**  
**Journal Staff Writer**

LINCOLN — The December accident suffered by Leonardo Cos Elias, who lost his leg, buttock and half of one hip after becoming trapped in a machine at Packaging Concepts Ltd., is the most serious in the company's recent recorded history. That accident follows scores of other injuries and accidents documented by the company since 2000.

PCL, an industrial facility at 15 Wellington Rd., in Lincoln, manufactures display cases and fixtures for major retailers including Target, Wal-Mart and Home Depot. It averages annual sales of \$28 million and annual revenues of \$10 million to \$50 million, according to an online company profile based on Dun & Bradstreet data. A subsidiary of Abbott Industries Inc., PCL employs 225 workers at its 200,000-square-foot facility.

Between 2000 and 2006, at least 125 injuries were recorded at the company, according to federal Occupational Safety & Health Administration records. There were far fewer recorded injuries in 2005 and 2006.

The records, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, include yearly injury logs from 2000 to 2006, the most current available. OSHA requires injuries to be recorded when they involve either loss of consciousness, medical treatment beyond first aid, restricted work activity or job transfer, or days away from work, or when those work-related injuries and illnesses are diagnosed by a physician or health-care professional.

The logs for the company record injuries ranging from a partly amputated finger, to a broken pelvis, crushed and fractured fingers, punctured palms, fingers and thumbs; hernias, severe lacerations, bruises, contusions, methylene chloride splashed in an eye, pulled tendons, eye abrasions and dozens of sprains and strains.

They occurred in different departments, primarily in production, the saw room, the sample room and the warehouse.

The records also include nearly 450 pages detailing OSHA citations against the company for serious and repeat violations since 2000, and a summary sheet indicating other citations since 1982. The pre-2000 records were destroyed, according to OSHA policy.

Company officials have declined comment because of the current OSHA investigation into Cos' accident.

According to the OSHA records, the company has reached three settlement agreements with OSHA since 2002, and paid more than \$28,000 in fines.

“Serious” violations during those years included over-exposure by several employees to the airborne chemical methylene chloride (a potential carcinogen); failure to protect employees from the chemical; lack of eyewash stations in areas where workers could come in contact with the chemical; lack of training and information on hazardous chemicals; lack of proper respirators, unguarded saws, and lack of machine lock-out procedures that prevent machines from accidentally starting up, among others.

OSHA defines a serious violation as one in which there is “substantial probability that death or serious physical harm could result,” and that the employer knew, or should have known, of the hazard.

Bureau of Labor Statistics data for the years 2003-2006 recorded an average 4.7 injuries per 100 workers per year in the manufacturing sector.

For the period 2000 to 2006, PCL recorded the most injuries — 35 — in 2000. The documents do not state how many total employees the company had in 2000, and the company has withheld comment. In 2004 and 2005, the company averaged 120 employees each year. The company currently has 225 employees, according to Dun & Bradstreet.

In 2001, the company had 30 recorded injuries. In 2002, it had 19. In 2003, it had 14 injuries. In 2004, there were 20. In 2005, there were 4. In 2006, the last data available, there were 7. For the seven-year period, the records show, the injuries resulted in 740 lost work days.

Between 2002 and 2004, PCL paid OSHA at least \$28,650 in fines for numerous violations categorized as serious, as well as other less serious violations.

When an OSHA inspector returned to the plant in October 2006, Joe Poplis, PCL’s director of manufacturing, told the inspector he believed that “OSHA was targeting his company,” and that citations in 2004 “cost the company thousands of dollars,” according to the documents.

An inspector returned the next day, and Poplis again “stated his concerns that OSHA targeted the company,” and that he “was concerned” that the inspector “was going to ” (Poplis did not respond to phone calls or a letter ‘find things.’ sent to his company.)

That OSHA inspection found that the company’s energy-control procedures “did not specifically state the techniques to be used to lock or tag out each type of machine.” Such procedures would prevent a machine from starting up automatically, or prevent a power surge.

The hazard was found on machines throughout the facility, posing the risk of “burns, electrical shock and death.”

On Dec. 14, 2006 — exactly a year before Cos’ accident at the plant — OSHA issued citations for the lockout/tag-out violations; for failure to conduct annual inspections of energy-control procedures — both categorized as serious. It also cited the company for not testing employees who used respirators for the right fit; and for not maintaining eyewash facilities in areas where methylene chloride was used.

By settlement agreement, the company paid a reduced fine of \$850 for those violations.

Last year, PCL was one of 28 Rhode Island companies receiving worker-training grants awarded by the Governor’s Workforce Board. The company received a \$20,000 matching grant. According to the board, the training program aims “to improve the human-resources potential in high-wage, high-growth industries to make Rhode Island more attractive to these types of businesses.”

[kziner@projo.com](mailto:kziner@projo.com)