



SAFETY ALERT

Wood Engulfment - Dunedin Energy Centre

Date of event	7 June 2026
Contact for further information	HSW@pioneerenergy.co.nz
Issued	31 July 2026

What Happened

A casual temporary worker on his fourth day on site was struck and engulfed by woodchip while working behind a delivery truck in the fuel unloading area at the Dunedin Energy Centre (DEC). Woodchip had bridged on the grate above the fuel hopper, stopping the flow into the hopper below. The boiler operator, driver and temporary worker entered the unloading zone to clear the blockage manually while the truck tipping body remained raised. When the driver raised the body slightly to resume unloading, woodchip held under tension released suddenly with far greater force and speed than expected, knocking the worker down and burying him under approximately 300–400mm of woodchip. He was freed, assessed on site and taken to a medical centre, where he was treated for facial abrasions and a minor dental injury. The potential consequence was fatality. WorkSafe NZ was notified.



Fuel unloading bunker at DEC — grate and unloading zone.



Delivery truck backed into the DEC unloading bay.



Woodchip bridging on the grate above the fuel hopper.

Key Issues Identified

No exclusion zone controls – No barriers or signage prevented entry into the unloading area while unloading was underway, relying solely on worker awareness.

No positive clearance process – The driver resumed unloading without confirming the worker was clear of the area, relying on assumption rather than verification.

Outdated procedures and accepted practice – Clearing grate blockages with the truck body raised had become common practice, but procedures did not address the risks or required controls.

Design and layout constraints – The bunker and grate layout contributed to recurring blockages, increasing the need for manual intervention.

Induction and supervision gaps – The driver had not received site-specific induction on engulfment hazards and exclusion zones, and the temporary worker was not adequately trained or supervised for the task.

Key Lessons Learned

- **Exclusion Zones:** Physical barriers and signage to help prevent entry into unloading zones while a vehicle body is raised or loaded — don't rely on awareness or behaviour alone.
- **Positive Clearance:** A verbal or physical all-clear, confirming every person is clear of the zone, must be built into the procedure as a stop point before unloading resumes or plant is moved.
- **Procedure Currency:** SOPs for critical risk tasks must reflect how the work is actually done in the field, be reviewed when conditions or equipment change, and be readily accessible to the people carrying out the task.
- **Engineering Controls:** Where a task regularly requires manual intervention near stored energy or mobile plant, engineering solutions to reduce or eliminate that need should be reviewed ahead of relying on procedure alone.
- **Site-Specific Induction:** Contractor drivers and temporary or agency workers need task-specific induction covering the actual hazards of the job they will do — not just general site or company-level training.