

Contractor and security company fined after security guard dies of hypothermia at windfarm

Two companies have been fined following an incident where a security guard died after being found lying face down and hypothermic, in deep snow, at a remote hillside in Ayrshire.

Ayr Sheriff Court heard that just after midnight on 22 January 2018, Ronald (Ronnie) Alexander, a 74-year-old security guard employed by Corporate Service Management Limited, was found by Police Scotland's Mountain Rescue Team at Afton Windfarm, a remote site near New Cumnock. Mr Alexander died later that day having never regained consciousness.

Corporate Service Management Limited was contracted by Northstone (NI) Limited, who trade as Farrans, to provide security for this site. Following a site visit by the managing director and operations director of Corporate Service Management, it was agreed that two guards would be required because it was known that mobile phone signals offsite are very poor.

Around lunchtime on 21 January, as forecasted, the weather deteriorated resulting in deep drifts on the road to the site from New Cumnock, and the road between the gatehouse where Mr Alexander worked and the site compound where his colleague was stationed. Although mobile phone communications were known to be poor and inconsistent at the site there was no landline. Two-way radios were available, but these could only be used for the guards to speak with each other and not offsite.

The HSE investigation into Mr Alexander's death found that when preparing their emergency weather plan, Northstone (NI) Ltd had failed to include those times when nobody from the company would be present at the site. The company also failed to ensure there was a back-up generator at either of the guard's locations to ensure that their welfare area would have heating and lighting should the main generator fail, despite this having occurred on several occasions previously. Northstone (NI) Ltd did not ensure that Mr Alexander or his colleague had a reliable means of calling for help.

At around 5pm, Mr Alexander's colleague managed to obtain a signal on his mobile phone and reported to Corporate Service Management's control room that not only had the generator failed, but that the only means of transporting the men offsite, a 4x4 vehicle, had become trapped in the deep snow at the site compound. Despite this, Corporate Service Management did not call the emergency services until after 9pm.

Corporate Service Management's emergency plan relied on there being effective communication between the guards and their control room, however they failed to provide this or to make sure that Northstone (NI) Ltd had provided this at the site.

Northstone (NI) Limited, Kingsway, Dunmurry, Belfast pleaded guilty to breaching Section 3(1) of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 and was fined £768,000.

Corporate Service Management Limited, MacLellan Street, Glasgow pleaded guilty to breaching Section 2(1) of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 and was fined £100,800.

Speaking after the hearing, HSE inspector Gerard Muir said: "This incident could so easily have been avoided had either company ensured that a suitable assessment had been made of the risk to those working at the site in poor weather, that suitable and sufficient means had been provided for the guards to communicate offsite, and that back-up generators had been provided, particularly when they knew how often the main generator had failed. By simply carrying out these correct control measures and ensuring safe working practices at this site, this tragic event could have been avoided.

"Companies should be aware that HSE will not hesitate to take appropriate enforcement action against those that fall below the required standards."

Notes to Editors:

1. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is Britain's national regulator for workplace health and safety. We prevent work-related death, injury and ill health through regulatory actions that range from influencing behaviours across whole industry sectors through to targeted interventions on individual businesses. These activities are supported by globally recognised scientific expertise. www.hse.gov.uk
2. More about the legislation referred to in this case can be found at: www.legislation.gov.uk/
3. HSE news releases are available at <http://press.hse.gov.uk>