

# IN•TOUCH®

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## Proper Handling and Storage of Flexible Polyurethane Foam

Flexible polyurethane foam is an organic material and is combustible like all organic materials. Organic materials include a wide variety of substances like wood, wool, paper, cotton, nylon, polyester, and polyethylene. Polyurethane foam, once ignited, can burn rapidly, consuming oxygen at a high rate and generating great heat. Like any other organic material, when it ignites and burns, polyurethane foam liberates smoke containing toxic gases, the primary one being carbon monoxide. Hazardous gases released by burning foam can be incapacitating or fatal to human beings if inhaled in sufficient quantities. Oxygen depletion in an enclosed space can present a danger of suffocation.

### **Fire safety is critical in relation to any storage and handling of flexible polyurethane foam.**

Foam should not be exposed to open flames or other direct or indirect high-temperature ignition sources such as burning cigarettes, matches, fireplaces, space heaters, forklift tailpipes, welding sparks, or bare light bulbs.

Foam is often stored in large quantities. Foam fabricators may keep large blocks of foam in inventory. Finished

*Why 'good housekeeping' can avoid some potential problems*

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goods manufacturers may store individual cushions or cores for use in products such as furniture, bedding, packaging, or automobiles. Retailers and wholesalers may warehouse quantities of slab foam for resale to customers, or in the form of products such as replacement parts or carpet cushion.

### **Proper care must be taken with foam to minimize potential fire hazards.**

Even foams formulated to meet specific flammability regulations will burn when exposed to a sufficient heat source. Safe and proper storage and handling of the material is essential.

Different business will face different foam storage situations, depending on the amount of foam they use and the manner in which it is stored.

### **Storage and Handling in Foam Manufacturing and Fabrication Operations**

Foam manufacturing and fabrication companies are likely to inventory the largest quantities of flexible polyurethane foam. Depending on the size of a particular manufacturing or fabrication operation, small pieces of foam or large "bun" sections containing hundreds of cubic feet of foam may be stored.

Large amounts of foam represent a significant fuel source for a fire. Flexible polyurethane fires generally tend to create very high temperatures - high enough to damage steel framework of buildings if enough of a fuel load is involved. Once ignited, foam fires can spread rapidly, producing intense heat, dense smoke, flammable liquids, and toxic gases.

Therefore, **all areas where significant amounts of foam are stored should be protected by automatic sprinkler systems.** Many fire districts and insurance policies require sprinklers.

In fact, all storage areas for flexible polyurethane foam should be analyzed for three key principles of fire safety:



- **Detection**, by using smoke detectors and/or other devices.
- **Notification**, using alarms to alert people in case of fire, so employees can exit the building and safety crews can respond.
- **Suppression**, via sprinklers, fire extinguishers, fire doors, and other methods.

Foam and fabricated parts should be stored away from fabrication operations, machinery, or other sources that have the potential to cause ignition. In some cases,

insurance carriers require a fire wall between storage and fabrication areas. Scrap foam should not be allowed to accumulate.

**Welding operations are a frequent but avoidable cause of many fires in manufacturing operations.** Whether performed by employees or outside contractors, these operations are often subject to strict insurance company guidelines, and extreme caution should be taken if heat or sparks could be generated around flexible polyurethane foam. Plant supervisors should be notified before welding or cutting takes place, so that proper precautions can be administered.

**Some foam fabrication processes, such as hot wire cutting, bonding or laminating can also pose potential fire hazards.** Caution should be exercised when engaging in these processes.

In certain fabrication processes, potentially dangerous fumes are emitted which should be exhausted through properly engineered ventilation systems. Fabricators should determine the proper procedures for handling the foam and be aware of any special handling requirements in the fabrication process.

Factory Mutual Engineering and Research (FME&R) recommends the following storage heights and sprinkler coverage as indicated on the chart below.

Commodity	Approximate Storage Height, ft. (m)	Approximate Clearance Sprinkler, ft. (m)	Storage, ft. (m) Density gpm/ft <sup>2</sup> (mm/min)	Area of Demand, ft <sup>2</sup> (m <sup>2</sup> )	Sprinkler Temperature Rating, °F (°C)	Minimum Orifice Size, in. (mm)
Polyurethane Foam	5 (1.5)	10 (3)	0.30 (12)	2000 (186)	286 (141.1)	1/2 (13)
	10 (3)	10 (3)	0.60 (24)	3500 (325)	165 (73.8)	17/32 (14)
	15 (4.6)	10 (3)	0.60 (24)	3000 (279)	286 (141.1)	17/31 (14)
				5000 (464)	165 (73.8)	
				5000 (464)	286 (141.1)	

FME&R recommendations for sprinkler coverage for palletized, solid pile, and shelf storage of flexible polyurethane foam.

## Storage and Handling in Finished Goods Manufacturing Operations

Finished goods manufacturers, such as furniture and bedding producers, will usually keep smaller amounts of foam than fabricators, but these amounts may still warrant storage and handling procedures similar to that of the foam manufacturer or fabricators. In fact, FME&R recommends that storage of large quantities of covered polyurethane foam mattresses be protected in the same manner as “raw” polyurethane foam. **Even in minimal quantities, it is recommended that foam be stored in a fully sprinklered area.**

Foam is a difficult material for most manufacturers to warehouse because of its bulk. The foam industry has traditionally provided a variety of quick shipment or “just-in-time” delivery systems to provide manufacturers with the quantities of foam they need for production. In such cases, shipments of foam are usually quickly dispersed through a manufacturing plant to assembly locations and customers.

This combination of smaller shipments and quick dispersal can minimize storage of raw foam and reduce the finished goods manufacturer’s need to provide protected areas.

These types of program offer convenience, but they can be just as important for helping manufacturers improve plant safety through proper handling of flexible foam and other materials.

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## Avoidable Danger: Fires From Smoking

Cigarette smoking is still the most common cause of fires in the home. The furniture industry, through its Upholstered Furniture Action Council (UFAC) program, has taken voluntary steps to minimize danger by making finished furniture resistant to ignition by smoldering cigarettes. Within the bedding industry, Federal Flammability Standard mandates that all mattresses be resistant to cigarette ignition.

Carelessness with cigarettes is a very real danger in foam storage and handling. Virtually all foam plants ban smoking, and cigarette smoking should be avoided anywhere flexible polyurethane foam is being handled or stored. A smoldering fire started by a cigarette may not be immediately detected, and such fires pose tremendous danger. Simply put, no smoking rules in foam manufacturing plants should be strictly enforced.

## Storage and Handling in Wholesale or Retail Operations

Wholesale and retail operations, such as upholstery businesses, distributors, carpet dealers, or fabric shops may store flexible polyurethane foam in the form of spare parts, cut cushions, slabs, or carpet underlay. While quantities may be either small or large, care must be taken to avoid possible fire safety problems.

For example, one carpet dealer suffered a fire loss when stacked rolls of cushion inadvertently came in contact with an uncovered light bulb. **Foam should be kept away from any ignition source such as smoking materials, naked lights, heating equipment, forklift tailpipes, sparks or open flames.**

Again, foam should be stored in areas that are protected by fire sprinkler systems.

## In Case A Fire Does Occur

Should a fire involving flexible polyurethane foam occur, evacuate the building immediately. Contact the local fire department and leave the fire fighting to the fire safety professionals.

Firefighters should drench burning foam with water with a spray nozzle. Firefighters should use self-contained breathing apparatus in areas where foam is burning. Manual firefighting may be difficult due to dense smoke and gases.

When flexible polyurethane foam is properly stored and protected, the risk of fire can be minimized. It is critical that proper caution be used to make sure that foam does not come into contact with potential ignition sources, and that all management and employees be properly instructed on safety procedures regarding foam and other combustible materials.

Additional information on proper safety procedures may be available from local fire safety officials and insurance company guidelines.

## Good Housekeeping Matters in Foam Plants

Combustible dust presents a significant hazard to industrial facilities, and it is at the forefront of regulators' agendas, especially the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). OSHA announced a National Emphasis Program (NEP) in 2008, and the agency is conducting inspections for combustible dust under this program. OSHA has issued an Advanced Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPR), and is working to develop a specific combustible dust rule. **It is PFA's opinion that manufacturing residue from FPF does not fit the National Fire Protection Association definition of combustible dust; however, this is an area of potential confusion that, at some point, must be addressed.** In one instance, OSHA used a Florida facility's product information sheet which cautioned users of FPF to avoid ignition of combustible dust to prove that the plant did, in fact, generate combustible dust. Any granulated residue in the plant – even though it isn't combustible dust – can be confusing to OSHA inspectors. It also very important to engage in good housekeeping practices and to maintain a clean facility. **Consider removing references to combustible dust on product information sheets and let plant supervisors know that good housekeeping can be very valuable and is a good business practice.**



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## Summary Points

- Like all organic materials, flexible polyurethane foam is a combustible material that requires proper care and attention to minimize fire hazards in storage and handling.
- All areas where foam is handled or stored should be analyzed for the three basic principles of fire safety: detection, alarm, and suppression.
- It is strongly recommended that all areas where foam is stored or handled be protected by automatic sprinkler systems.
- Flexible polyurethane foam should not be exposed to open flames or other direct or indirect high-temperature ignition sources such as burning cigarettes, matches, fireplaces, space heaters, forklift tailpipes, welding sparks, or uncovered lights.
- Foam suppliers, fire safety officials, and insurance companies can provide information to individual businesses on safety practices regarding flexible polyurethane foam.
- Consider removing references to combustible dust on product information sheets.
- Inform plant supervisors good housekeeping matters. The presence of any dust or granulated residue can be mistaken for combustible dust.

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