

# Consulting with the Experts

by Marisa Hirsch

Free and non-punitive visits from Department of Labor inspectors helped TruLine Truss boost plant health and safety.

**T**hese days, many component manufacturing (CM) plants have a safety director (and sometimes even a team) dedicated to making sure their plant is a safe and healthy environment. But, some plants have realized that a little additional help is beneficial as a means to ensure that everything is being done correctly per Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards.

TruLine Truss, Inc. in Sparta, NC, is one such plant. In 2007, TruLine employees invited the North Carolina Department of Labor (NCDOL) into their facility to review their safety and health procedures and programs. The experience was one that they found to be positive, effective and financially prudent.

## Learn More about Your State's Services

If TruLine's experience has you curious about setting up a voluntary inspection for your company, let OSHA help you research the process. Find out about free consultative services in your state by visiting the web pages below.

- You can find out more about the purpose of the free consultation program at [www.osha.gov/dcsp/smallbusiness/consult.html](http://www.osha.gov/dcsp/smallbusiness/consult.html), which explains it in detail. It also lays out the process your company would go through if it were to participate.
- You can find out how to get in touch with your state's consultation office at [www.osha.gov/dcsp/smallbusiness/consult\\_directory.html](http://www.osha.gov/dcsp/smallbusiness/consult_directory.html).

Rick Bedsaul, human resources and safety director at TruLine since April 2004, had been working hard to keep plant safety and health in the forefront. While he felt things were going very well, he also thought there were some areas that could be improved. It was during a review of NCDOL's website, in search of tips and information, that Bedsaul came across a notice about the department's free consultative services. (In fact, free consultations are available in every state. Please see the sidebar for more information.)

"That's where I got the idea that this might help us out, because we thought we had some gray areas that we needed to check out," said Bedsaul.

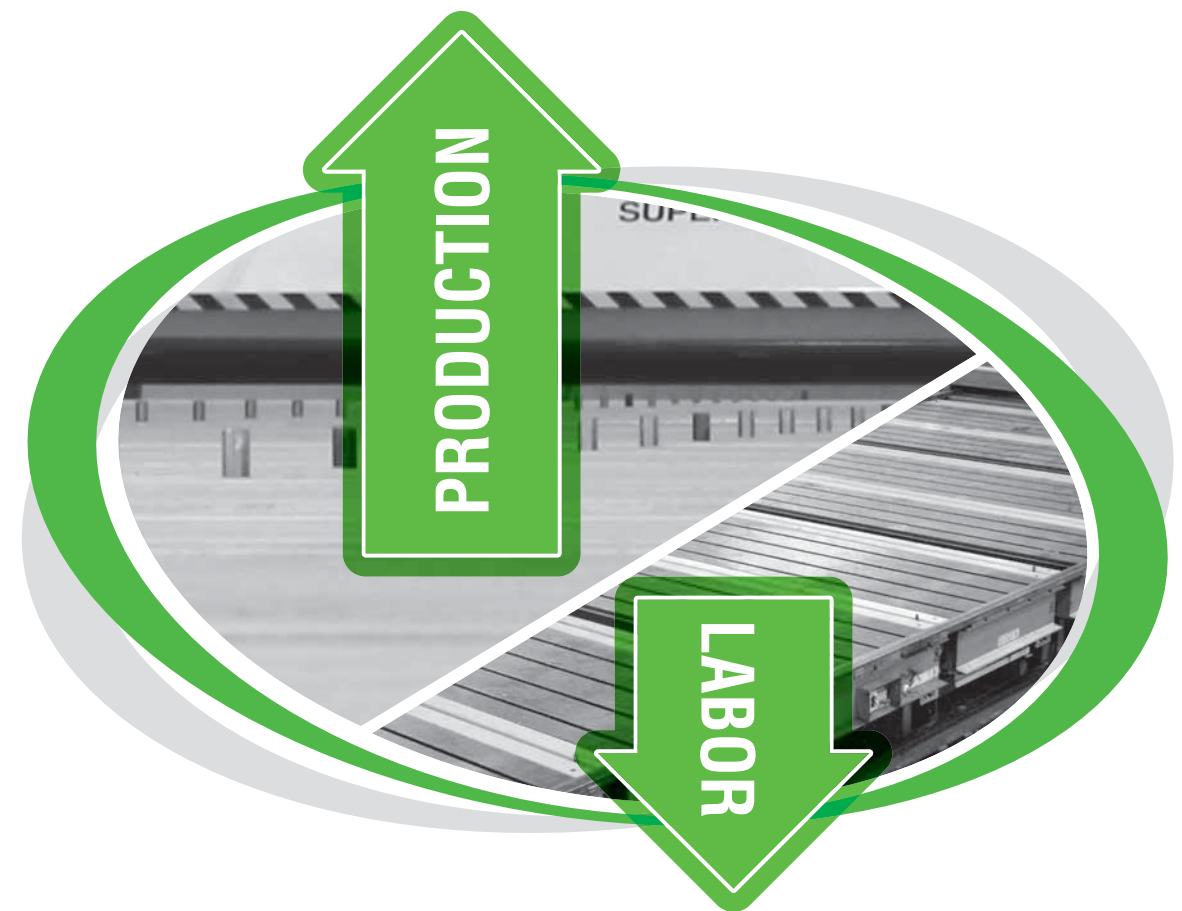
Countrywide, these free consultations/voluntary inspections exist to help smaller businesses comply with OSHA regulations and are intended to be educational and helpful. During this elective process, no fines or penalties are issued, and no hazards are reported. (The exception, Bedsaul said, might be if an inspector saw something grossly negligent.) In that case, it might have to be reported. The only thing expected of the facility is that employees be committed to fixing any hazards found, and to doing so within time limits that are mutually agreed upon.

## Full-Scale Inspections

Once Bedsaul finished gathering information about the consultation service, he took the idea to Daryl Blevins, general manager, who agreed that it was a good idea. TruLine then completed the simple one-page application, which is available online, and faxed it to NCDOL on March 19, 2007. (As part of the voluntary consultation service, TruLine had the power to defer OSHA agents from the moment they received a letter stating that their application had been received.) Soon after submission, the company was contacted by the health and safety inspectors to set up the consultation visits for August and September of 2007.

The way states perform their consultative services may vary, but in North Carolina safety and health visits are separate—and facilities may choose if they'd like to

Continued on page 40



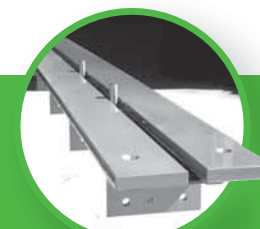
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## at a glance

- ☐ TruLine Truss had a positive experience when they participated in a voluntary state health and safety consultative service.
- ☐ The company saved \$38,671 in fees and fines by inviting NCDOL inspectors into its plant for inspections.
- ☐ Getting involved in voluntary safety inspection programs can help companies avoid costly fines.



have both, or just one in order to focus on a specific problem. However, if a facility were to choose to take part in only one segment, then they can only defer inspections related to that segment. For example, if a CM plant only requested a health survey, then compliance officers could still technically inspect the plant for safety issues (and vice versa).

TruLine chose to take part both in both health and safety surveys, which meant they received visits from two separate inspectors. "We decided to do both because I wanted a full-scale idea of what we actually needed to improve on," Bedsaul said.

According to NCDOL's website ([www.nclabor.com](http://www.nclabor.com)), a health survey (or inspection) focuses on issues like ventilation, hazardous chemicals, ergonomics, blood borne pathogens and hazard communication. A safety survey addresses issues like working surfaces, machine guarding, electrical hazards, fire protection, power tools and housekeeping. The site also states that "All surveys will include assistance and information to develop a successful safety and health management system."

Bedsaul said he found the visits to be equally useful and that he learned things from both of them. "It was pretty educational for me because it gave me more knowledge of what to look for," he said. "[It] just gave me a little broader picture."

In the end, TruLine received one safety inspection and two health inspections. There were two health inspection days because the inspector had to come back another day, when the necessary equipment was available, to do noise and dust monitoring.

Bedsaul said that TruLine did nothing to prepare for the inspections. "We kept everything as usual so we could actually figure out what we needed to do to improve the work environment," he said.

### Identifying Issues

The first health inspection took place on August 2, 2007, and lasted about half a day. The inspector arrived and did an initial walk-through of the facility. Bedsaul said he noted some problems that needed to be addressed, such as an employee bathroom that didn't have hot water. In total, the health inspector noted 31 hazards. Many of these were corrected during the survey, and others were corrected before the inspector returned to do noise and dust monitoring on September 20, 2007. The last 13 were corrected by mutually agreed upon deadlines, with all being completed by November 21. Some took longer for various reasons, but the last correction to be completed required an electrical contractor—whose schedule had to be taken into account. Bedsaul said the inspector also reviewed three to four years' worth of TruLine's OSHA 300 logs, as well as their written safety program. He found no problems there and had no recommendations.

Bedsaul said the safety inspection was conducted on August 15, 2007, and took about half a day. The safety inspector also reviewed the written safety program and 300 logs without citing anything, as well as the company safety manual. Bedsaul said the safety inspection centered more on the shop area, and that the inspector's biggest concerns were electrical in nature—such as the use of extension cords and equipment. Twelve hazards were found during this inspection, and the deadlines for fixing them ranged from 30 to 60 days.

On September 20, the health inspector returned to TruLine to complete the customary dust and noise monitoring (services that normally cost several thousand dollars). The dust monitoring involved checking the levels of dust caused by operating machinery, such as saws. It was done by placing monitors on employees' shoulders that measured the dust in the air in their work areas. Noise monitoring is also done by placing devices on employees.

The results of these tests were actually surprising to Bedsaul. He said he had been concerned about the plant's dust levels, but those were actually well below the allowable level. On the other hand, the noise levels in the table area were too high (which was not something Bedsaul expected) and required corrective action.

"In the plant we have the saws and tables fairly close," he said. "Noise from the saw was being transmitted into part of the table work area. So, I had to do some extra noise monitoring for our employees and we now have them wear hearing protection when they work next to that saw area."

### Talking & Timing

Aside from the hearing protection, some other corrections TruLine was required to make involved signage, fall protection, combustible materials, forklift safety and chemicals. Bedsaul said that several of the things TruLine corrected were considered serious in nature by the inspectors, but were still quite simple to fix. One of the most challenging things to fix involved how fans were being powered. In order to meet regulations, some of the fans were moved closer to outlets and one new line was run to operate a large fan.

After the surveys were completed, the inspectors explained any problems or issues so that TruLine would know how to address them. They also discussed how much time it would take to make the needed corrections and agreed upon a schedule.

"When they find these things that have to be corrected, you get to sit down with the inspector and you discuss the time-frame to fix these things," said Bedsaul. "They're not really pushy. They won't tell you 'You need this done in a week.' They'll work with you and give you ample time to complete these projects."

In fact, the process is more like a conversation than anything else. Bedsaul said the inspectors were very willing to explain what needed to be fixed, why and when. Later on, if the allot-

ted time to address a problem is coming up and it doesn't seem possible to finish on time, facilities can apply for extensions.

Shortly after the inspections were conducted, TruLine received a list of found hazards by mail. These lists included OSHA standards, correction due dates and detailed descriptions of hazards. The reports were required to be posted for employees to observe for three working days or until corrections were completed.

### Education Pays Off

According to Bedsaul, there were many benefits to taking advantage of the free consultative services—and no drawbacks. He said fear of the unknown might be part of why some companies feel nervous about inviting inspectors into their facilities. Most people probably have some concerns about hazards the inspectors might see. However, the unknown might actually be a pleasant surprise, as with TruLine discovering that their concern over dust levels was unwarranted.

"The noise monitoring and the dust monitoring were good benefits for us because we had concern about the dust, and the dust levels were way under," he said. "We really didn't know. Actually we were better than we thought.... You may think it's bad, but you could actually be better than you think you are."

As far as the benefits of free consultation services, TruLine learned from NCDOL that the money they saved in fees and fines totaled \$38,671. While most of the problems were not expensive to fix, the fines and fees (for things like monitoring) would have been—if the company hadn't taken advantage of the free consultation service.

Another big advantage is the OSHA inspection deferral that comes with participation and successfully fixing hazards. This deferral lasted for 18 months after their original request for consultation was submitted, beginning when TruLine received the letter from NCDOL confirming that their request had been received. However, if an employee complaint was called in, a fatality occurred, or there was a referral from another agency, then OSHA would be able to override the deferral.

Another benefit that both Bedsaul and General Manager Blevins mentioned was the significant educational value. "I learned things that were a help to me, as far as even reporting



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