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A new dawn, a new day

Careful planning must precede the gradual re-opening of hibernating commercial buildings around Australia.

With COVID-19 restrictions slowly easing around the country, the time is right to take action to ensure a smooth transition for businesses to return to their workplace in the coming weeks.

Restarting HVAC systems in hibernating buildings can carry some substantial risks including outbreaks of Legionella, reduced indoor air quality and damage to building systems. Precautions must be taken to avoid serious consequences.

“A few months ago, many buildings were effectively put into hibernation and their HVAC systems shut down,” says AIRAH CEO Tony Gleeson, M.AIRAH. “There are many risks associated with turning these systems back on, including water systems that could harbour Legionella. The good news is there are practical steps that can be taken to safely flush them out.”

For building owners and building managers who have partially or completely shut down HVAC systems within a building during the period of restricted activity, there are important safety considerations to address before re-opening spaces to workers.

“It’s positive to see restrictions lifting and organisations preparing workers for a return to the office,” says Standards Australia head of stakeholder engagement, Daniel Chidgey. “We know there is a lot to be considered when returning to a building that has been empty for a long period of time; we have standards that can help with that important process.”

Chidgey points to the AS 3666 Air-handling and water systems of buildings – Microbial control standards series as an important tool in assisting a smooth and safe transition beyond the obvious safety measures.

Cooling towers and condenser water systems can experience significant issues when shut down. These include corrosion build-ups on system surfaces that haven’t been chemically



treated, and dead legs in water systems that may harbour Legionella. AIRAH has a suite of resources on cooling towers and Legionella prevention that should be referred to.

If ventilation systems have been shut down completely rather than operated at reduced levels, occupants returning to the building may face health risks associated with low indoor air quality and mould. Measures must be taken to identify and address these issues before they are reopened for business.

And of course, essential safety and maintenance measures must be kept up-to-date, even if a building has been unoccupied, otherwise the statutory maintenance regime may be deemed non-compliant – in which case the building should not be occupied.

“The transition of working from home to back to office will have its challenges,” Gleeson says. “But having a properly prepared building doesn’t have to be one of them.” ■

Would you like to know more?

www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/covid-19-information-workplaces

www.airah.org.au/legionella

Guide for building owners:
<https://tinyurl.com/y9vg4abf>



Steve France, Affil.AIRAH, is general manager of the projects department for South Pacific Air Conditioning, based in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

Responsibilities

Above and beyond all of the professional responsibilities associated with a general manager’s position.

During the course of a normal day I may also be called upon to provide any or all of the following: marriage counselling, religious/spiritual guidance, medical/health/wellbeing, financial adviser, family planning, legal adviser, mediator, translator, professional/personal development trainer, ambassador/role model, father, son, husband and mate.

Specialty

My ability to think outside the box.

Passions

Education, ethics, morals, principles and taking ownership, irrespective of the outcome.

Challenges

Self-consumed and ignorant people.

Professional development

Academic degrees, courses/conferences and manufacturer training.

Inspiring words

“A pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty.”
– Winston Churchill

Favourite destination

Anywhere in North Queensland.

Future plans

To continue to excel at all things I apply myself to. ■