



Hazardous Materials Removal Workers:

Abating our wasteful lifestyle

The closest I have ever knowingly been to hazardous waste was when I was twelve years old and my mother told me to mop the kitchen floor. The house, a rental, had seen its better days and the floor really needed some “deep” cleaning so I mixed some ammonia and bleach together in a bucket. I quickly learned never to do that again. It was all I could do to throw it, bucket and all, out in the garden before the fumes overcame me. Little did I know at the time that I had created “HHW” or household hazardous waste. When I threw it all in the garden, I contaminated both soil and air.

What are hazardous wastes? They are discarded materials with properties that make them potentially harmful to human health or the environment. Hazardous wastes can be in the form of liquids, solids, contained gases, or sludge. Think lead, asbestos, radioactive substances, mold, to name just a few. These materials typically possess at least one of four characteristics: ignitability, corrosivity, reactivity, or toxicity.

The Standard Occupational Classification Manual defines hazardous materials removal workers’ duties thus:

Identify, remove, pack, transport, or dispose of hazardous materials, including asbestos, lead-based paint, waste oil, radioactive materials, or contaminated soil. Specialized training and certification in hazardous materials handling or a confined entry permit are generally required. May operate earth-moving equipment or trucks.

Hazardous materials removal workers use a variety of tools and equipment, depending on the work at hand. Equipment ranges from brooms to personal protective suits that completely isolate workers from the hazardous

material. Because of the threat of contamination, workers often wear disposable or reusable coveralls, gloves, hardhats, shoe covers, safety glasses or goggles, chemical-resistant clothing, face shields, and devices to protect one’s hearing. Most workers are also required to wear respirators while working, to protect them from airborne particles or noxious gases. The respirators range from simple versions that cover only the mouth and nose to self-contained suits with their own air supply. Recent improvements to respiratory equipment allows for greater comfort, enabling workers to wear the equipment for a longer period of time.

With our society’s creation of more waste has come specialization within the hazardous material removal field. There are workers involved in transporting waste, often cross country. There are decontamination workers who perform duties similar to those of janitors but the materials and areas they clean are radioactive. Decommissioning workers remove and treat radioactive materials generated by nuclear facilities and power plants. Emergency and disaster response workers take care of spills and clean accident sites.

Once hazardous materials have been removed from the site of origin, they need to be stored in landfills or incinerated. Sometimes the materials’ form is changed from liquid to solid in preparation for storage. All these activities require protective gear, heavy machinery, and adherence to federal laws.

There are no formal education requirements for a person to become a hazardous waste materials removal worker although federal, state and local government standards require specific types of on-the-job training which often

Occupational Wages Published June 2011

(data from May 2010) for Hazardous Materials Removal Workers

Area Name	Hourly Inexperienced	Hourly Median	Annual Inexperienced	Annual Median	Training Level
Ogden-Clearfield MSA	\$9.13	\$10.88	\$18,990	\$22,630	Moderate-term OJT (1-12 months)
Salt Lake City MSA	\$13.50	\$16.50	\$28,080	\$34,330	Moderate-term OJT (1-12 months)
United States	--	\$17.92	--	\$37,280	Moderate-term OJT (1-12 months)
Utah	\$9.72	\$14.64	\$20,210	\$30,450	Moderate-term OJT (1-12 months)

consists of 40 hours of formal training. Workers involved with nuclear waste take about three months of courses learning government regulations as mandated by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Any occupation with “hazardous” in its title is just that. Because there is increased public awareness concerning hazardous waste, more of it is being removed. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in 2010 there were sixty-one work related deaths in this field, down from eighty-eight in 2008.

This occupation has a four star rating which means it has a good employment outlook and relatively high wages. It is expected to experience about average employment growth with a moderate volume of annual job openings. The need for replacements, rather than from business expansion, is projected to make up the majority of job openings in the coming decade. Openings will expand due to increased calls for eco-friendly power production.

As a society, Americans create lots of waste, that’s a given. With the help of hazardous waste removal workers, we are able to hide the evidence. For awhile. 🗑️

Resources

- <http://jobs.utah.gov/jsp/wi/utalmis/oidoreport.do>
- http://www.studentscholarships.org/salary/214/hazardous_materials_removal_workers.php
- https://www.osha.gov/dep/fatcat/dep_fatcat.html
- <http://www.bls.gov/>
- <http://www.epa.gov/>
- <http://geowords.org/ensci/13/13.htm>

