

Manufacturers and Distributors Fight for Proper Extinguisher Maintenance!

BY NORB MAKOWKA

Sunday, October 2, 2005 members of NAFED, CALSAFE, and various manufacturers attended the International Code Council (ICC) meeting in Detroit to voice their unified opposition to a change in the International Fire Code (IFC) that would eliminate monthly inspections. According to the proposed change, maintenance would only be required every three years if the extinguisher was equipped with an electronic monitoring device.

The background of the IFC issue goes back to the start of the ICC code revision cycle. Greg Rogers, Chair, ICC/IAFC Western/Canadian Code Action Committee, presented a proposal to the IFC to allow electronic monitoring of fire extinguishers to replace thirty-day inspections and annual maintenance, and allow "physical inspection and maintenance" to be performed every three years. The IFC committee rejected this proposal because "there was no technical substantiation to verify that these monitoring devices will perform all of the requirements of NFPA 10 maintenance provisions."

However, ICC policy allows individuals to present "individual considerations" at the Final Action Hearings of the ICC code cycle. Greg Rogers and Jeffery M. Shapiro, International Code Consultant, presented public comments to reconsider the change in favor of eliminating monthly inspections. Mr. Shapiro represented MIJA, Inc. at this hearing. MIJA, Inc. is the current manufacturer of an electronic fire

extinguisher monitoring equipment marketed under the name of en.Gauge.

The individuals that gave up their weekend to fight this issue included: John Gioseffi, Broward Fire Equipment Co., and NAFED President; Darrell Hefley, Jorgensen Company, NAFED region six director and CALSAFE president; Darrel Harguth, representing CALSAFE; Vic Modic, Badger Fire Protection Inc.; Fred Goodnight, Amerex Corp.; Chuck Kimball, Brooks Equipment Co.; Joe Beranek, Ansul Inc.; Bill Vesco, Buckeye Fire Equipment Co.; and Norb Makowka, NAFED.

The day before the hearing, we discussed what items we planned to bring forth in order to make certain we would all be addressing separate issues. At the hearing, the various individuals presented their position on why the proposed change should not be adopted. Some of the positions presented were:

- Nothing has changed since the original proposal was disapproved on the grounds that "there is no technical substantiation to verify that these monitoring devices will perform all of the requirements of NFPA 10 maintenance procedures."
- Extending maintenance to a three-year interval would not be in accordance with the manufacturers' maintenance requirements and could violate warranty and listing of the fire extinguisher.
- There is no track record for the electronic monitoring devices to establish that they can replace monthly inspec-

tions, let alone annual maintenance. One manufacturer estimated that at the current time, 1/1000 of 1 percent of fire extinguishers are equipped with an electronic monitoring device.

- NFPA 72, *National Fire Alarm Code*®, requires that if the device is connected to a fire alarm panel, testing of the monitoring device has to be conducted by a trained fire alarm technician.
- Annual maintenance of fire extinguishers proves time and again serious deficiencies that electronic monitoring will not indicate.
- Electronic monitoring does NOT monitor the pressure in the extinguisher but rather monitors the position of the gauge indicator being "in the green." Many gauges are replaced on fire extinguishers because the extinguisher is empty while the gauge still is "in the green."
- NFPA 10 requires that inspection and maintenance procedures included verifying that the operating instructions are legible, tamper indicators are in place, that the extinguisher, if full, displays no physical damage, and that the MHIS label is in place. Current electronic monitoring devices cannot perform these functions.
- NFPA 10 provides minimum requirements; the changes being considered by the IFC reduce these minimum requirements by a factor of thirty-six for inspections and a factor of three for maintenance.

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All of these points and more were made, but to no avail. The general consensus of the group representing the fire extinguisher industry felt that the matter was decided before we even got up to speak. One individual indicated he felt insulted by the comments received from IFC members.

NAFED, CALSAFE, and the manufacturers present were and still are united in their opposition to allow electronic monitoring to replace annual maintenance. Amerex Corporation has withdrawn their support for the en.Gauge product and no longer offers it as an option.

NAFED's executive committee is discussing this issue and will provide additional information in the future.

On a similar note, NFPA 10 has a proposed change that would allow electronic monitoring in lieu of monthly inspections in certain installations. This will be challenged at the NFPA Annual Meeting this June in Orlando. The reason for the challenge is that the NFPA 10 standard lowered inspection requirements to allow electronic monitoring to be used for inspections. Since the standard provides minimum requirements, why should these requirements be lowered to meet a new product on the market? Shouldn't the product be developed to meet the requirements of the standard?

You can help with this NFPA 10 issued by being a member of NFPA and attending the annual meeting when this item is presented for a vote of the NFPA members present. If you can attend the NFPA meeting and are a member in good standing (at least six months) you can vote on this issue.

Many times members ask, "What is NAFED or the manufacturers doing for me?" This is just one example. Many individuals gave up a weekend to work for the betterment of the industry and to protect life and property. The next time you talk to your suppliers and NAFED board members, remember to thank them for their commitment and assistance.

One of the things that upsets me the most about this issue was the conduct of MIJA, Inc., the manufacturer of the en.Gauge product. MIJA was invited to speak about their product at our conferences this year and stated that they had no intention to have their product replace annual maintenance. At the NFPA 10 Report on Comment meeting, John McSheffrey, Jr., vice president of business development, MIJA, Inc., again stated that en.Gauge is not intended to replace annual maintenance. However, the conduct of MIJA representatives at the ICC meeting does not echo the position they have previously voiced, both in public presentation and private discussion. I believe they owe the association and this industry, both of which supported their efforts, an explanation.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to all of the individuals that attended the hearing in Detroit as well as those individuals that worked so hard behind the scenes to help the industry. ▽

Norb Makowka is NAFED's executive director – technical.