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Sutherland helping Chemical Safety Board reach broader audience

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Serving as chairperson of the U.S. Chemical Safety Board (CSB), Vanessa Allen Sutherland is laser-focused on building upon and spotlighting the agency's influential and game-changing work by moving it forward both professionally and culturally.

"I am increasing our communication internally and externally while encouraging innovative, efficient ways of working," stated Sutherland, who has a background in practicing law. "We also have a new and active board, which I would like to see out in communities advocating the fantastic reports and recommendations the staff has already developed. Performing and releasing the results of incident investigations in a timely manner, issuing general safety recommendations, identifying untapped stakeholders, and publishing articles and op-eds are all part of our work to reach a broad audience."



Sutherland already knows how to reach a broad audience. In 2011, she was appointed chief counsel to the U.S. Department of Transportation's Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration. She oversaw hazardous materials' transportation regulations, investigation support, enforcement and outreach. Moreover, her family's influence has shaped her professional career.

"I come from a family of engineers, doctors, lawyers and educators, so my fascination with this industry is dear to me," expressed Sutherland, who earned her MBA from American University. "When I was nominated for this position at the CSB, I immediately thought about what I could personally bring to the agency and how I could help it achieve its safety mission."

Sutherland personally brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to this position, as well as increased productivity. Since being confirmed by the Senate in August 2015, she has overseen the completion of three full investigations: the final two volumes of the CSB's examination of the Macondo/Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion and fire; the board's investigation of the 2013 fire and explosion at the West Fertilizer facility in West, Texas; and the explosion and fire at the Caribbean Petroleum Corp. near San Juan, Puerto Rico. Sutherland has also commenced work on a new five-year strategic plan for the agency while holding numerous public business meetings.

"From an operations perspective, my goal is to ensure we have consistent policies, current procedures, satisfactory annual audits, improved compliance and structure, as well as clear roles and responsibilities," she explained. "I am tackling pre-existing, internal issues that have undermined efforts in the past; this should lead to staff spending more time on mission-critical work and finding their jobs easier and more fruitful."

At the forefront

According to Sutherland, the CSB's mission-critical work puts it at the forefront of driving meaningful safety change. The agency has been determining the root causes of accidents and highlighting opportunities for improvement over the decades through its nearly 100 major investigations. In 2009, the CSB made a joint recommendation to the American Institute of Chemical Engineers and to the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology that called for university chemical engineers to be trained on chemical process safety. By 2012, the two groups had successfully acted upon this recommendation.

"As a result, process safety training is now a requirement for getting a chemical engineering bachelor's degree across the U.S.," said Sutherland. "Similarly, in 2011 the CSB recommended the American Chemical Society



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(ACS) develop hazard evaluation guidelines for university chemical research laboratories, and the ACS has now done this as well."

Setting safety standards

The CSB also helps set the safety benchmark in the chemical industry. Sutherland believes, and highlights that, safety is a shared responsibility among company personnel, government agencies, safety standard-setting bodies, local emergency planners and first responders, and educational institutions.

"For the public to feel safe from low-frequency, high-consequence chemical disasters, all these organizations need to work collaboratively toward a common purpose," asserted Sutherland. "There needs to be a better business case for why prevention of an accident is better than remediation after one."

The CSB is making this case by issuing key recommendations that heighten safety at a national level, which include implementing good engineering practices, worker trainings and procedures, and equipment inspections.

"Above all, we are working toward creating a culture that permeates throughout organizations and influences all decisions from the CEO down," shared Sutherland. "I want the CSB to continually drive meaningful safety change and to be an exciting place to work."

The CSB already drives meaningful safety change. It has issued almost 800 recommendations and has ensured successful implementation of over 70 percent of these recommendations, which reach companies, government agencies and trade associations.

"We continually track each recommendation and aim to ensure its implementation," explained Sutherland. "The board members and I are touring facilities to learn more, and we continue to engage stakeholders."

Moving forward

CSB board members also engage with people in industry, speaking and presenting at conferences across the country. Sutherland recently presented at the Chlorine Institute's and American Fuel & Petrochemical Manufacturers' annual conferences, while others promoted process safety management reform or emergency response issues. The CSB's work also reaches educational programs, with an online safety program that informs companies and workers about accident hazards directly based upon the CSB's investigative findings. This program has produced 55 online videos on YouTube, with nearly 4 million total views. Sutherland wants to enhance this significant work.

"I would like to institute a culture where the CSB is constantly communicating with industry and embraces continual learning," she said. "A primary goal of the agency is to advance reasonable, broad-scale chemical safety change while using our resources in the most efficient manner possible to reach broader audiences. Creating a healthy dialogue and proactive outreach about our reports, lessons learned and recommendations will help prevent the next chemical disaster."

For more information, visit www.csb.gov or call (202) 261-7600.

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