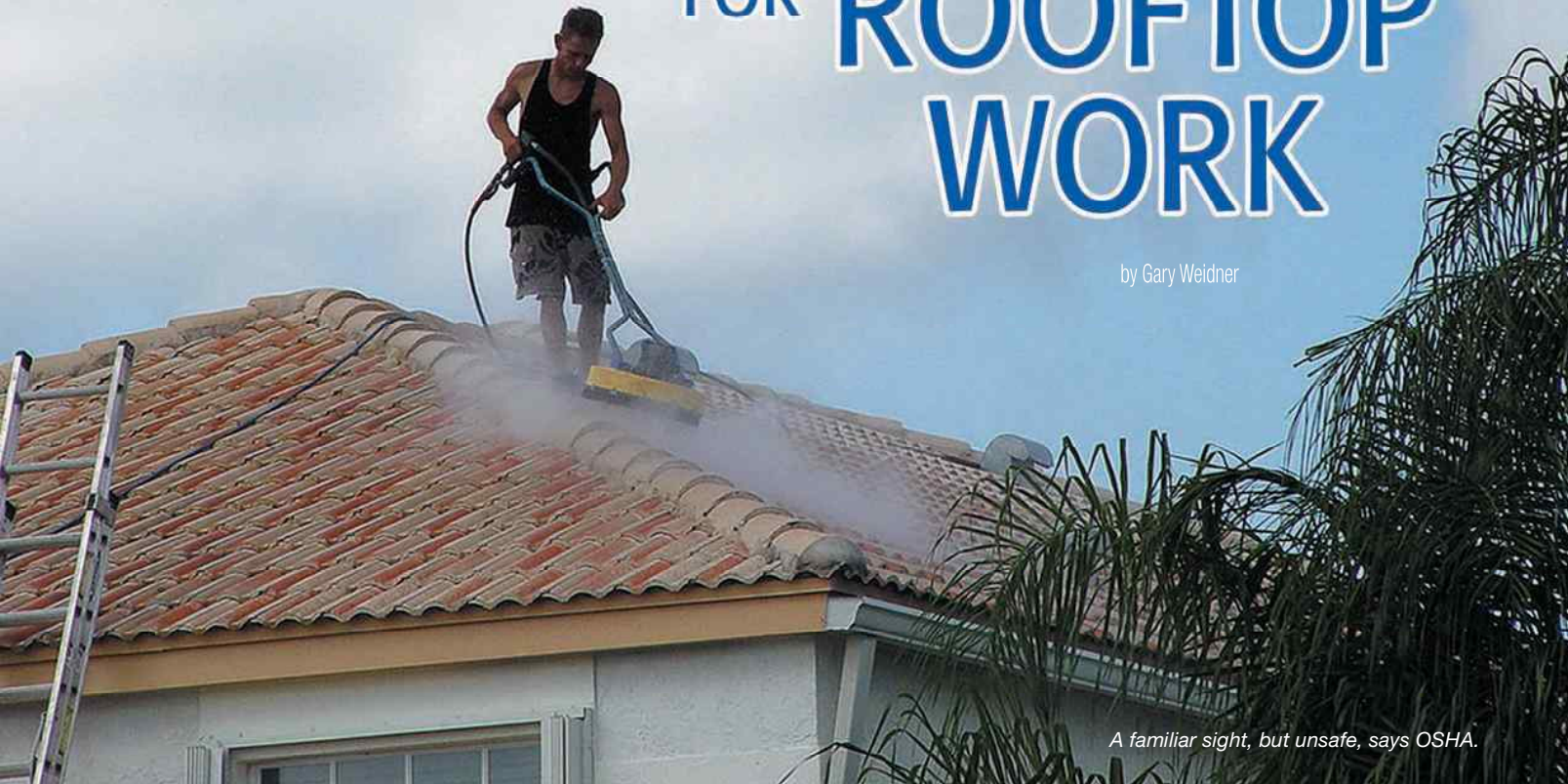


OSHA REQUIREMENTS FOR ROOFTOP WORK

by Gary Weidner



A familiar sight, but unsafe, says OSHA.

This may be frustrating, but if you employ people, you operate in a different world than self-employed people, who can in essence do whatever they want to regarding their own safety.

If you have one or more employees, you need to know what is required of you as an employer. The folks at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) have created a lot of regulations aimed at employee health and safety, and working at heights is one of the topics addressed by those regulations.

The title of this article refers to rooftop work because that is probably the most common type of pressure cleaning work that is carried out at some sort of height. However, the requirements described also apply to other elevated work areas. Another fact to be aware of is that many states have their own regulations, which sometimes differ from the federal rules of OSHA.

How High Up?

The magic number is six feet. If you have an employee perform work more than six feet above the ground (or above another level), you have to make provisions for fall protection. That's the case even for a small, low-slope (not more than 4/12 pitch) roof. Fortunately, OSHA itself acknowledges in a brochure, "Under the standard, employers are able to select fall protection measures compatible with the type of work being performed."

What Are the Options?

OSHA does a good job of organizing and presenting a lot of information at www.osha.gov. You can use the site's search box to access everything from arcane regulations to helpful pamphlets and brochures. Here is what we found from the OSHA material and other sources.

Most of the fall protection "systems" mentioned sound heavy-duty and very expensive. Temporary guard rails,

safety nets, and fall arrest systems are examples of fall protection methods that are simply unrealistic for a typical, brief visit to a roof for washing. On the other hand, a fall restraint system is within the realm of reality for pressure washing work.

To avoid confusion, let's look at a couple of definitions. A fall arrest system consists of a body harness, a lanyard, and a very strong anchorage. This system protects a worker who actually falls over the edge, easing the jolt by means of a shock-absorbing bungee cord type of arrangement. Definitely overkill for a simple roof cleaning.

A fall restraint system simply serves to prevent a fall. It does so by means such as a body belt combined with a lanyard and a suitable anchorage point. It eliminates the chances of a fall by preventing the employee from getting too close to the roof edge. The employee can be within inches of the edge, as long as the restraint system prevents the employee from being able to fall over the edge.

Needless to say, OSHA has more to offer on the subject, mandating various details of the body belt, the lanyard/rope, and the anchorage. The good news: according to safety firm J.J. Keller & Associates, "OSHA suggests that, as a minimum, fall restraint systems should have the capacity to withstand at least twice the maximum expected force needed to restrain the person from exposure to the fall hazard."

When you think about it, that's not so hard to achieve—twice the force needed to prevent your worker from walking off the roof.

Have a Plan and Do Training

Going out and spending a few bucks for the components of a fall restraint system isn't the whole story. If you want to protect your employees and stay out of trouble, you also need to do two not-too-difficult things.

The first is to think through and write down a fall protection plan. The plan should list the fall hazards your people encounter, describe your fall restraint system, outline the procedures for assembly and use, explain inspection and maintenance needs of your system, and cover what to do if a person does get injured.

The second is to do some straightforward employee training on the items in your fall protection plan. Documenting the training is a good idea.

The Bottom Line

Providing fall protection doesn't have to be extraordinarily complicated or expensive. It also serves to protect you, the contractor, from having to pay expensive workers' compensation claims, liability costs, and elevated insurance premiums.

This brief article provides only some highlights of fall protection. Aside from the OSHA website, you can also learn more by contacting OSHA. Contrary to popular fears, going to OSHA with questions does not trigger visits from OSHA inspectors, nor does visiting the OSHA website or participating in seminars or training offered by OSHA. *ct*



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