

Common Myth #22

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Fire extinguishers are not needed if sprinklers are present.

Description

This is absolutely not true. Sprinklers and fire extinguishers perform separate and distinct functions as part of a “defense in depth” concept towards fire protection. Sprinklers cannot have the mobility, speed and versatility of a fire extinguisher to suppress a fire in its incipient stages. Extinguishers require the presence of someone “present, willing and able” to extinguish the fire, while sprinklers do not. If the fire occurs when no one is present, or if the fire grows too quickly for the safe use of an extinguisher, sprinklers become the next effective layer of defense.

Only hand portable extinguishers and wheeled extinguishers are capable of extinguishing fires quickly during the initial, incipient stages of a fire. They are the only devices that can handle hazards that are outside the design of a fixed system – i.e. a vehicle fire on a loading dock, a forklift fire in the yard, fires caused during remodeling or maintenance operations. There are also situations where undocumented alterations have taken place, the occupancy use has changed or new hazards have been brought in such as Class D hazards where the sprinkler design has been unwittingly negated.

Finally, no one can predict how people will react in a fire situation. We are all afraid of fire and will revert back to natural instincts, “fight or flight.” Without modern, well maintained, hazard specific fire extinguishers at their disposal, people may try to fight with anything available – buckets of water, blankets, sand, even their own hands and feet.

Hand Portable Extinguishers, Fixed Systems Sprinklers, Smoke Detection and Alarm Systems, Building Codes and Fire Departments are all required in order to have a good Fire Protection Program that will handle any foreseeable hazard. Each element in the program is essential, each element has its place and each element cannot take the place of another.

Perhaps we as an industry have not kept track of how much good we have done.