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Warehouse Ergonomics Failure: Worker Killed When Unstable Pallet of Bottled Water Collapses

On May 13, 2022, at about 5:00 a.m., a 39-year-old warehouse worker in California was acting as a forklift spotter near the end of a night shift. He was assisting a forklift operator who was moving double-stacked pallets of cased bottled water. The pallets were shrink-wrapped and stacked to a combined height of about 9.5 feet.

As the operator attempted to remove the top pallet, the forklift forks struck part of the wooden pallet, causing it to shift and tilt backward slightly. While the operator repositioned the forks, the spotter moved behind the load, out of the operator's line of sight. When the forks were reinserted, the cases of bottled water on the pallet shifted against the shrink wrap, which failed and dumped multiple cases onto the spotter, striking and burying him. Coworkers uncovered him and called emergency services, but he could not be revived and died from his injuries.

The CA/FACE investigation identified several contributing factors, including unstable palletized loads, unsafe positioning of the spotter in the danger zone, and breakdowns in communication between the operator and spotter. The report emphasized the need for safer pallet stacking and storage practices, clear exclusion zones around moving equipment, and strict adherence to material-handling procedures in warehouse environments.

Source: Cdph.ca.gov