

IDLE AND VACANT BUILDINGS

ALLIANZ RISK CONSULTING



Large abandoned industrial hall

This Tech Talk provides property loss prevention guidance on general security and pre-shutdown preparations for idle and vacant industrial/commercial buildings.

AT-A-GLANCE

- The loss frequency is often greater at vacant or idle properties.
- Idle and vacant buildings are exposed to property damage from fires, vandalism and freezing of pipes.
- Industrial and commercial properties represent approximately 20% of the idle and vacant fires reported each year to NFPA.

INTRODUCTION

Every year Allianz Risk Consulting (ARC) observes more facilities rendered idle or vacant. An idle building is generally unoccupied, but is likely to contain equipment and storage, while a vacant building is unoccupied without contents. Such facilities are more and more common in today's business climate.

When shutting down a facility, you can't just lock the doors, turn off the lights and walk away. Idle and vacant buildings still have substantial property values exposed to loss. Loss prevention and risk reduction measures should be considered for all buildings scheduled to be idled or permanently shut down.

NFPA reports that the risk of fire with a significant loss of property is greater in idle and vacant buildings. According to NFPA, 43% of vacant building fires were intentionally set and accounted for 25% of all intentionally set structure fires. In addition, unsecured properties are much more susceptible to incendiary fires than secured properties.

Percentage of intentional fires	Type of vacant property
57%	Unsecured
31%	Secured

Source: NFPA

ARC RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on best property loss prevention practices. Please contact your local ARC representative to discuss your specific idle or vacant location.

Combustibles

- Remove all unfixed materials of a combustible nature from inside and outside the building and store off site.
- Install a fire detection system with remote signaling in unsprinklered facilities if there are extensive timber/ combustibles in construction.

Building Security

- Seal letterboxes and all other openings.
- Stop any mail being delivered to the building.
- Fit quality security mortise deadlocks on all entry/exit doors.
- Secure all windows with any applicable window locks.
- Board up ground floor and accessible upper floor windows. Boarding should be 18mm (¾ in.) thick exterior grade plywood with non-returnable screws. If the unoccupied period envisaged is prolonged, consideration should be given to boarding the ground floor and accessible upper floor windows with professionally installed steel shutters (all exposed bolt heads should be made tamper proof).
- Lock entry posts to prevent unauthorized caravans/ vehicles from entering the site.
- Block off and secure all access points and ladders to roofs and upper levels with anti-climb paint and barbed wire systems. It is preferable to remove vertical ladder access/egress systems unless there is any potential health & safety issue (fall from height, etc.).
- Isolate electric roller shutters. They should be preferably welded internally in the closed position (or be fitted with an additional hasp and staple arrangement to allow them to be padlocked shut). All internal compartment doors (i.e. roller shutters, fire and smoke doors, etc.) should be fully closed and all visitors/ contractors specifically instructed to ensure they remain closed on departure.

- Maintain any burglar alarm system. The prevention of false alarms (such as from wildlife, temperature and humidity, etc.) should be achieved by removing the cause and not by turning off the alarm systems or isolating affected zones. Routine testing of the installation should be maintained.
- Retain a reasonable level of internal and external lighting where appropriate for inspection, security patrols and access purposes.
- Endeavor to leave any existing overt security systems in place to give the appearance of a security presence (i.e. CCTV, perimeter beams, etc.), even if these are powered down.
- Ensure all keys are accounted for by use of a key control log book. Change locks if they are not.
- Record and list all visitors and contractors. Ensure building entry and lockdown procedures are available and adhered to.
- Immediately repair any breach in building or perimeter security. Ensure guarding and any CCTV warning signage is maintained in place around the entire perimeter. Install additional signs if the existing do not maintain an appearance of a continuous security presence.
- Preferably arrange for a manned 24/7 guarding presence at the site or overnight patrols by an approved guarding firm. Any patrols should be at random intervals and times to ensure any pattern is not observed.

Premises Inspections

- Visit the building periodically (weekly is recommended) and maintain detailed records of all observations.
- Quickly implement actions for all noted deficiencies.
- Remove evidence of vandalism/graffiti and repair any broken windows/entry points immediately when they are discovered.

Services

- Isolate services at the mains and drain all water systems down (except electricity necessary to keep alarms and fire pumps operational, water for fire sprinklers and heating that may be on in winter for fire sprinklers or for areas subject to freezing). Temperatures should be maintained at or above 5°C or 40°F for any areas with water-filled piping, such as fire sprinklers.

Maintenance

- Maintain the building in a good state of repair.
- Make sure building is watertight by suitable repairs (i.e., roofs, guttering, etc.).

Fire

- Maintain any existing automatic fire detection systems.
- Inspect, test and maintain any existing fire sprinkler systems to be operational. Monthly recorded inspections of the sprinkler control valves should continue to ensure they remain locked in the open position. Fire pumps should be exercised weekly to verify proper operation.
- Maintain any fire doors in the closed position.
- Keep fire dampers in ducting and extraction systems in the closed position.
- If retained, subject existing fire extinguishers and hose reels to their normal annual maintenance schedules.
- Undergrowth surrounding the premises should be kept under control. If weed killers are used, dead vegetation should be cleared from within 3 m (10 ft) of any building and fence line.

General

- For health and safety reasons, no person should be allowed to enter the building unaccompanied or without the use of an efficient communications method. Always notify a colleague that the building is being entered and of the expected duration of the visit.



A fire department battles a blaze in a vacant factory in the US in 2012

References:

- NFPA Report, *Vacant Building Fires*, Marty Ahrens
- NFPA 1, *Fire Code*

QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

PLEASE CONTACT:

Nicolas LOCHET

Regional Technical Manager

Allianz Risk Consulting

+33 607 798 412

nicolas.lochet@allianz.com

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www.agcs.allianz.com

Tech Talk is a technical document developed by ARC to assist our clients in property loss prevention. ARC has an extensive global network of more than 100 property risk engineers that offers tailor made, customer focused risk engineering solutions.

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