



# STEPS TO A SAFE RESTART:

## Getting Back to Business Following COVID-19 Shutdowns

By Dan Braiman

**T**hese past few months have highlighted how adaptable, resilient, and supportive the lumber and building materials industry truly is. While the COVID-19 pandemic has cast a dark shadow on the world, representatives of our industry have worked diligently to follow government guidelines, either staying safely open as essential businesses or closing if required, and in some cases, by transforming production lines to manufacture personal protective equipment (PPE).

Business owners and staff have adapted to serve their customers and communities the best they could while working to keep their employees safe and supporting their colleagues in

the industry. Now, as we look ahead and states begin to allow for more business reopenings and those who chose to close during the height of the pandemic opt to reopen, it will be critical that they move ahead with caution. A prudent, measured approach will be paramount in ensuring the continued safety of their customers and employees, as well as to prevent property damage or loss.

In fact, there are a number of risks associated with leaving a facility vacant for a long period. Here are the top three things business owners in the industry should keep in mind to mitigate their risk exposure and reopen safely.

### Step 1: INSPECT AND CLEAN THE FACILITY'S GROUNDS

Remember that in some cases, these businesses have been completely vacant for months. In others, staff may have been light, and the facility likely has not been performing its normal level of operations. In either case, the facility is likely due for a good inspection and some housekeeping.

Take time to carefully examine the interior and exterior of all buildings on the premises, including exterior

storage areas, as well as parking and entry areas. Consider that trash may have accumulated or a rodent or insect infestation could have occurred. Also, check for vandalism and undetected theft and review for leaks and clogged drains. Further, look for any weather-related damage that could expose the facility to fire or slip-and-fall liability to customers who may visit the site.

## Step 2: INSPECT ALL UTILITIES AND PLAN A PHASED RESTART

Even in a partial shutdown situation, turning all systems to “go” at once could be risky. Business owners should consider that something could have happened while the facility was out of use or in limited use. When powering up systems, it’s a good idea to have someone keep an eye on each area, while someone else flips the electrical switch for that area. Then, it’s critical to walk through the facility and check for the smell of burning wires—acrid, like burning plastic. For business owners who just powered down the main power source before closing, they should turn off each breaker before powering the main, then power them up in a similar observed manner.

As with electrical systems, business owners should be

smart with plumbing systems when reopening. If the plumbing systems were shut down, these should be examined before and after water is turned back on. If they were not turned off, systems should still be thoroughly inspected. Business owners should open the cabinets under the sink, run water, flush the toilets, and make sure no leaks are present, examining all water outlets including sinks, toilets, hose connections, main risers, and building sprinklers.

Additionally, sprinkler systems should be checked, by a professional if possible. Finally, though they may not be in use while temperatures are more mild, heating and cooling systems should be checked and cleaned with filters replaced before firing them back up.

## Step 3: INSPECT ALL MACHINERY AND EQUIPMENT

Inspecting all machinery and equipment can be a bit more complicated but is just as important in mitigating a facility’s risk exposure. Before and after startup, all machinery should be examined, including all cutting equipment, any moving conveyors, forklifts, loaders, carts, and vehicles. It’s particularly important that business operators look to clean any flammable dust near equipment, especially dust close to moving parts of machinery. Those parts should be properly greased and lubricated prior to startup.

Poorly lubricated conveyor bearings and saw hubs

have led to devastating fires in the past. After a shutdown, machinery may need maintenance to avoid this. Business owners should ensure that all hydraulic fluid, fuel, motor oil, coolant, and battery fluid levels are in line with manufacturers’ standards and check for leaks. If any leaks are found, they should report those leaks for repairs and clean any leaked fluid prior to restarting. After restarting these machines, they should check the equipment again to make sure there are no problems once pressure is placed on the equipment.

## STAY SMART. STAY SAFE.

Again, this has been a tremendously difficult time for everyone. For lumber and building material dealers, at first, it was unclear for many whether they were essential and permitted to stay open according to their state laws.

As a specialty insurer of the wood niche, we observed that many of our policyholders resumed or continued operations as essential businesses. However, we also saw variations in what this meant across the industry—residential kitchen cabinet manufacturers shut down, but cabinet makers for medical offices continued production. And in some cases, we noticed businesses that were permitted to open shut down because the owners or workforce were not comfortable coming in. And still, in other cases,

lumber and building material dealers got creative—completely changing their production lines to create PPE for those in need. In all, we are proud to say we saw about 80% to 85% of our insureds find a way to stay open in some shape or form.

After all of this hardship, it’s vital that these businesses continue to succeed. To do so, business owners should pay special attention to these risk exposures related to restarting business for at least the first several weeks after reopening, as well as to guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). And remember, these risk mitigation tips not only make good sense after a restart, but during the regular course of business as well. **LC**

### About the Author:

Dan Braiman is a loss control manager for Pennsylvania Lumbermens Mutual Insurance Company. He has more than 14 years of loss control experience in the wood industry. Dan can be reached at [dbraiman@plmins.com](mailto:dbraiman@plmins.com). PLM’s full Restart Checklist can be found at [www.plmins.com/about/newsroom/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-resource-center/](http://www.plmins.com/about/newsroom/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-resource-center/).