

By Jan Schultz

The Imperial Republican

Frenchman Valley Coop's general manager believes a strict adherence to procedures and extensive training resulted in a positive outcome of what could have been a devastating grain bin accident Tuesday morning, Sept. 13.

Nate Holman, hired five months ago as the coop's grain operations manager, escaped injury after he was freed from a bin partially filled with corn and walked out on his own following two and a half hours. His successful removal came after concentrated efforts from the Imperial Volunteer Fire Department (IVFD), Imperial EMS, numerous coop employees, Gavilon (former Peavey Grain) employees and mutual aid assistance from the Grant Volunteer Fire Department.

Manager Jim Chism said, "Procedures are in place for a reason, and everything was done as it was supposed to be. That is why you follow procedure and spend hours in training."

Holman was trapped in grain about halfway up his chest for approximately two and a half hours, but was never completely buried.

Chism said his head and arms were above the grain the entire time and he was in constant communication all the while.

Holman, who entered with a harness attached to his body, was in the bin to alleviate some plugging that had disrupted the grain flow.

Grain was being removed from the bin, and Chism said all lock-out/tag-out and bin entry procedures had been followed before the employee entered.

Holman had entered the bin from a manhole on the east side of the silo, and Chism said the top of the grain was about six feet below the access hole.

While inside, some bridged grain dislodged and the resulting movement pulled Holman into the grain.

The silo in which he was trapped was among those on the west end of the coop's Imperial grain facility on the south side of the railroad tracks.

After Holman was trapped, Chism said the posted observer, FVC employee Craig Loeffler, immediately radioed for assistance from other employees, who arrived shortly. Loeffler, also harnessed and tied to a safety rope, went in himself to see if he could assist but was unable to free Holman.

A volunteer firefighter himself, Loeffler then radioed the agronomy office, which called 911. The Imperial Volunteer Fire Department was summoned at 8:36 a.m.

After arriving, a team of IVFD firefighters took the elevator to the top of the silos on the north side of the tracks and transported their equipment across the catwalk to the south side. Once above the silo involved, they set up the coop's tripod and the fire department's rope rescue equipment. From there, two firefighters rappelled down to the grain, about 120 feet.

They made their way over to the victim, and initially supplied Holman with oxygen. By that time, the Grant Fire Department had arrived with a four-sectioned grain sleeve and firefighters on top of the silo began to lower those pieces to the firefighters below.

The grain sleeve was assembled around Holman and grain was removed from inside the sleeve both by hand and from a truck-mounted grain vacuum outside. A cable on a winch was also sent down as a safety line.

Once enough grain was removed it allowed the sleeve to settle deeper around the victim in the grain and alleviated pressure on him. With the aid of the firemen, he was able to crawl out of the

grain sleeve and make his way on his own to the manhole, and outside.

Holman was transported to Chase County Community Hospital for evaluation and released early Tuesday afternoon. Chism said he stopped by the coop office afterwards, and was back at work Wednesday morning when he reported just being “a little stiff” from the ordeal.

As a precaution, three Imperial firefighters were taken to the hospital Tuesday for evaluation and were also released with no medical issues.

Chism expressed thanks and gratitude to all involved—the Imperial and Grant fire departments, Imperial EMS, as well as a number of coop and Gavilon employees. Police Chief Larry Browning, Sgt. Rob Browning and Sheriff Kevin Mueller were also on hand to assist if needed.

Chism said these incidents are not things anyone likes to have happen.

“But in this case, the outcome could not have been better,” he said, again emphasizing the importance of following procedure and spending hours in training.