
Condensate Management Drains, Separators and Compliance Strategies

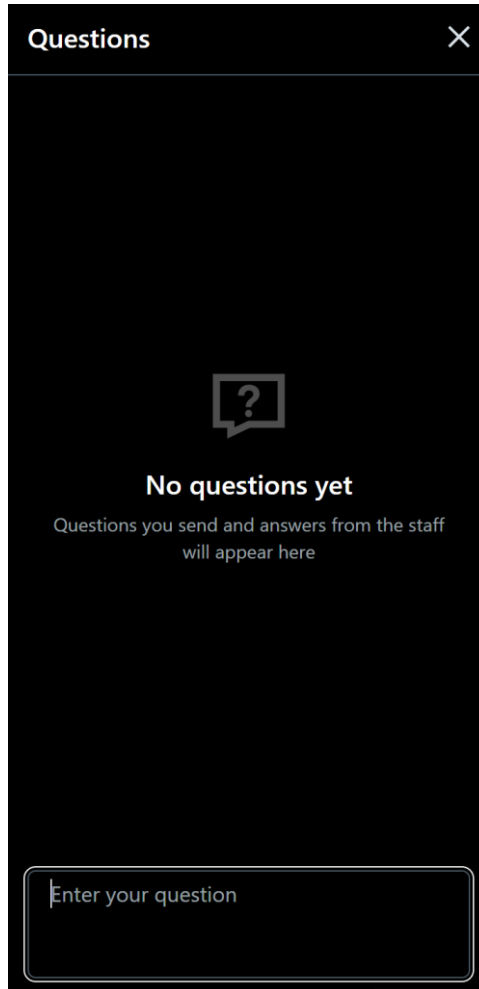
Peter Vinck
Inflow Corporation
Keynote Speaker



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KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Jake Hall,

"The Manufacturing Millennial"

Earn 1 PDH

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Condensate Management Drains, Separators and Compliance Strategies

Introduction by
Compressed Air Best Practices® Magazine



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About the Speaker



Peter Vinck
Inflow Corporation

- Founder & Senior Engineering Consultant, Inflow Corporation
- 18 years improving industrial compressed air systems
- Previous roles in utility energy efficiency, system design, auditing, and application/sales engineering for top manufacturers and vendors



Condensate Management for Compressed Air Systems

Drains, Installation, Maintenance & Separators — Best Practices, Tricks & Traps



Peter Vinck

Senior Engineering Consultant
Inflow Corporation

20+ years of field experience — actionable advice

Compressed Air Best Practices® Magazine Webinar

July 30, 2026 • 2:00 PM Eastern

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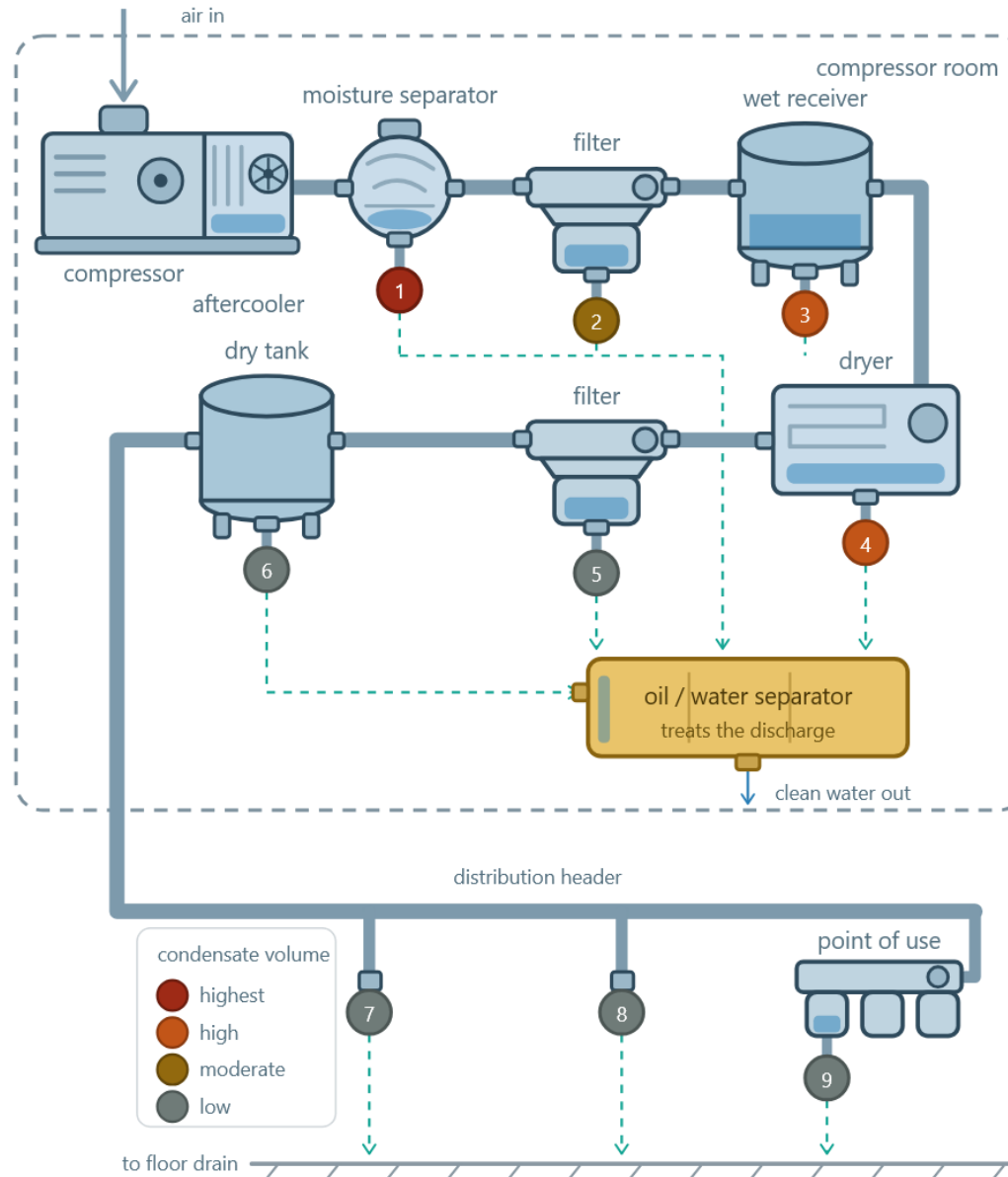
- System & Control Design
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Agenda

1. Why condensate management matters
2. What's in the condensate — and what it wrecks
3. The four types of condensate drains
4. Where drains belong — walking the low points
5. Installation best practices — drains & separators
6. Maintenance & monitoring
7. Separators — treating the discharge
8. Tricks & traps from the field
9. Case studies — timer costs & “no-loss” that wasn't
10. System design best practices & selection checklist
11. Resources & references + Q & A

Compressed Air Systems and Condensate Drain Locations



Condensate Drain I.D.

- 1 moisture separator
- 2 filter — before receiver
- 3 wet receiver
- 4 dryer
- 5 filter — after dryer
- 6 dry tank
- 7 drip leg — mid header
- 8 drip leg — header end
- 9 point-of-use bowl

1–9 = drain points on even a simple system

- color = condensate share (red = most water)
- every discharge → oil/water separator → clean water out

Why Condensate Management Matters

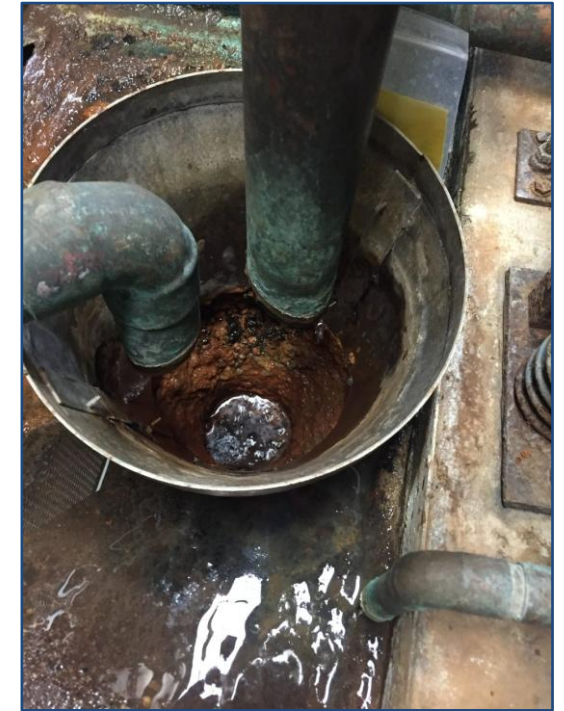
- **Every compressed air system makes condensate — it is unavoidable physics**
 - Compress & cool air below its dew point and water drops out; oil-lubricated compressors add an oil aerosol on top
 - A 100 HP compressor can shed ~20–30 gallons of condensate per day (more in hot, humid weather)
- The drain is doing more work than most people realize
 - Fails OPEN → blows compressed air 24/7 — money straight out the exhaust
 - Fails CLOSED → water & oil carry downstream into dryers, filters, tools and product
- Failure is silent — nobody notices until there's water at the tool or the air bill jumps



A dryer draining straight to a floor drain — note the oil staining around it

What's in the Condensate — and What It Ruins

- **It is not just water**
 - Water + compressor lubricant (oil aerosol) + rust & pipe scale + atmospheric particulate
 - Typically acidic, pH ~4–5 — corrosive to carbon steel and fittings
 - An oil/water emulsion — cannot legally go down the drain untreated
 - Oil-free compressors: no lubricant — but even more acidic (pH can reach ~3–4), still carries intake hydrocarbons & dirt — test before assuming it's sewer-safe
- Downstream damage when it escapes:
 - Desiccant dryers — oil fouls the beds and destroys dew point
 - Filters — flooded elements, high pressure drop, wasted energy
 - Tools & valves — rust, sticking, premature wear
 - **Product — rejected parts, contaminated coatings, food & pharma risk**



Real condensate: rusty, oily sludge — note the corroded copper

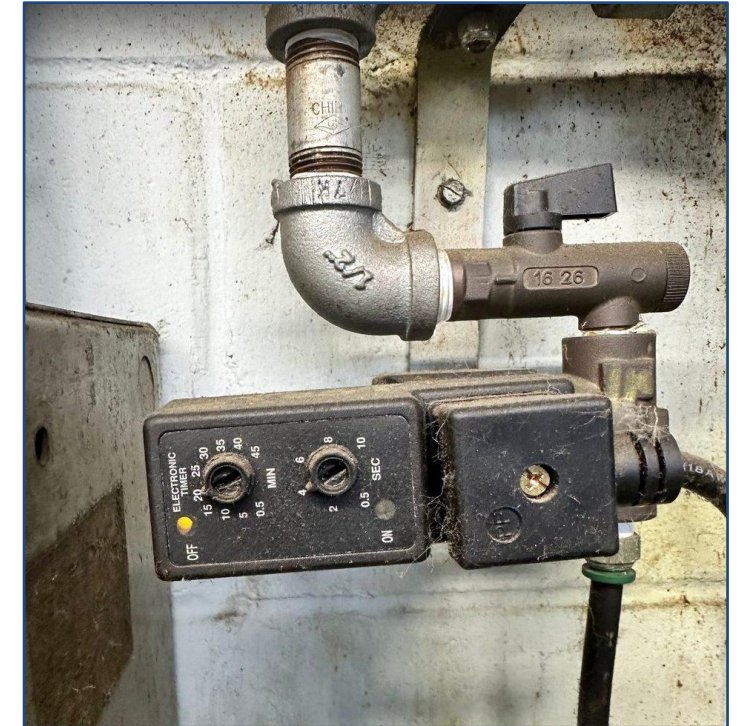
The Four Types of Condensate Drains

Drain type	How it works	Air loss	Reliability	Best use
Manual valve	Operator opens it periodically	High (if left open)	Depends on the human	Backup / secondary only
Timer / solenoid	Solenoid opens on a fixed time cycle	High — dumps air every cycle	Moderate; orifice clogs	Budget installs; sized backup
Mechanical float	Float rises with liquid, opens a valve	Low (when clean)	Fouls with oil & sludge	Clean, light-duty points
Zero-loss electronic	Level sensor opens only when full, then reseals	≈ Zero	High (with maintenance)	Best practice where air = money

KEY TAKEAWAY: Match the drain to the point — but default to zero-loss wherever compressed air is money.

Manual & Timer / Solenoid Drains

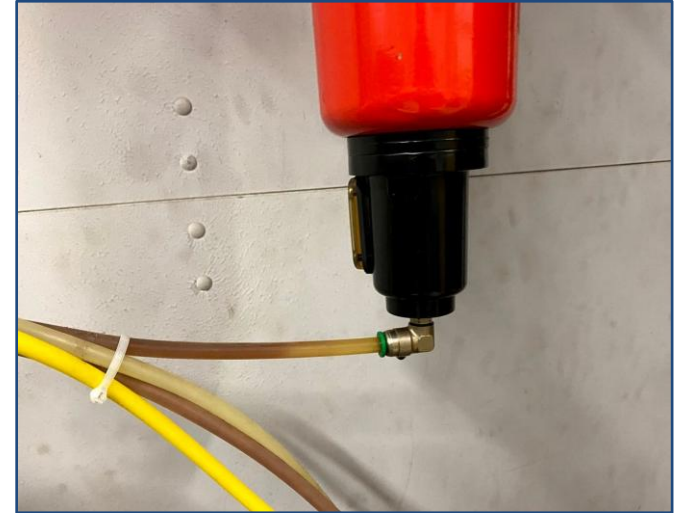
- **Manual valves**
 - Cheapest option, but relies on someone remembering
 - Left cracked open = a continuous air leak — acceptable only as a backup
- **Timer (solenoid) drains**
 - Open for a set number of seconds every few minutes — whether or not there's water
 - TRAP: every dump blows compressed air; a factory-default or over-set timer can waste thousands of \$/yr
 - TRAP: the small orifice clogs with oil & scale → fails closed, no discharge
 - Where they fit: budget installs or a timed backup — set the interval to the actual load



Timer / solenoid drain — note the MIN & SEC dials (and the cobwebs)

Mechanical Float Drains

- **How it works**
 - Rising condensate lifts a float that opens the valve — no air loss in principle
- **Pros**
 - No power needed, no air waste when working, mechanically simple
- **Cons & traps**
 - Oil and sludge gum up the float and seat → sticks OPEN (air leak) or CLOSED (carryover)
 - Sensitive to orientation and back-pressure; small orifices clog
 - Needs regular cleaning to stay reliable
- Best use: relatively clean, low-oil points — not ideal right after an oil-flooded screw



Top: field install on a coalescing filter — note the oil-stained tubing.
Bottom: mechanical no-loss float drain (Clean Resources)



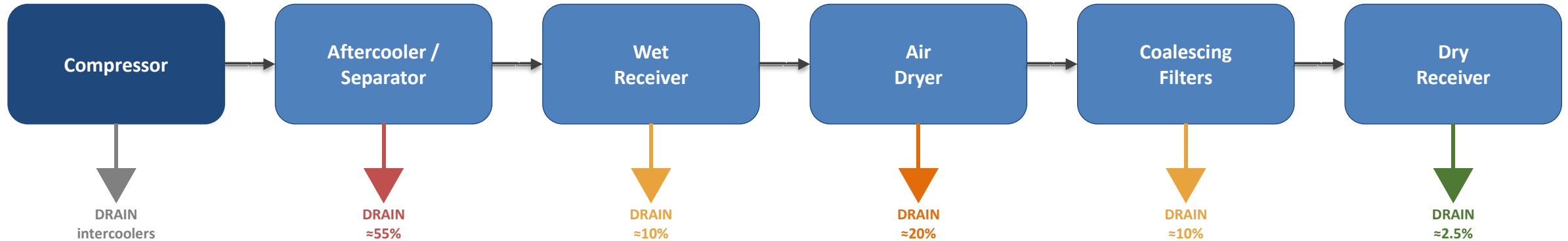
Zero-Loss / Pneumatic & Electronic Drains (Best Practice)

- **How it works**
 - A chamber fills; a level sensor detects liquid and opens the valve only long enough to expel condensate, then reseals before air escapes
- **Why it's best practice**
 - Essentially zero compressed-air loss + reliable, demand-based discharge
- **Features to look for**
 - Level-sensed (not timed) · fault / alarm output · test button · large clear orifice
- **The catch**
 - Needs power or air power, higher up-front cost, still needs annual service
 - Wire the fault contact to your alarm / BMS — know about carryover before your product does



Zero-loss electronic drains on a receiver — note the individual lines & isolation valves — Pneumatic Powered Drains

Where Drains Belong — Walk the Low Points



Every place air cools and water drops out is a drain point:

- Aftercooler / moisture separator — the biggest volume, right at the compressor
- Multi-stage machines: every intercooler is a drain point too — verify the package's interstage drains & route them to the OWS
- Wet receiver bottom · air dryer · every pre- and coalescing-filter bowl
- Dry receiver and downstream low points
- Drip legs at header ends and every drop to a machine

Drain color & % = typical share of system condensate (red = most water) — size each drain point for its share

Installation Best Practices — Drains

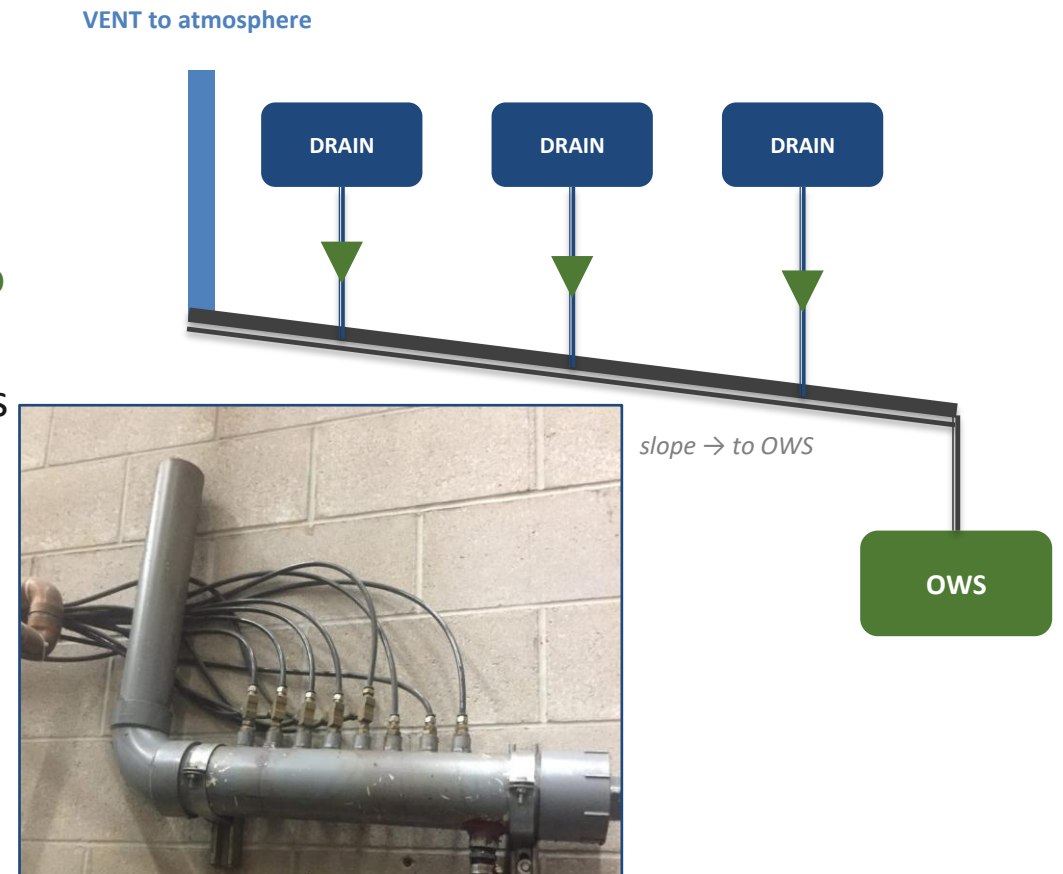
- One drain → one line → one isolation valve (service it without shutting down)
 - Never manifold drains into a shared header — back-pressure makes upstream drains fail & carry over
- Treat drain lines like plumbing — let gravity work: slope down, short runs, no lifts
 - Don't push condensate up-and-over to a remote drain under air pressure — it kills zero-loss savings
- Specify drains you can test and see working
 - Test button + sight glass / air-gap discharge → confirm operation at a glance
 - Failure & set-point indicators are usually poor — pick drains with a fault output
- Know your real condensate load — time how fast the discharge fills a bucket or refills a 55-gal drum; it sizes timer settings & flags a failing drain
- Route the discharge to an oil/water separator — never a bare floor drain



The compressor OEM's own warning: drain lines cannot share a common header

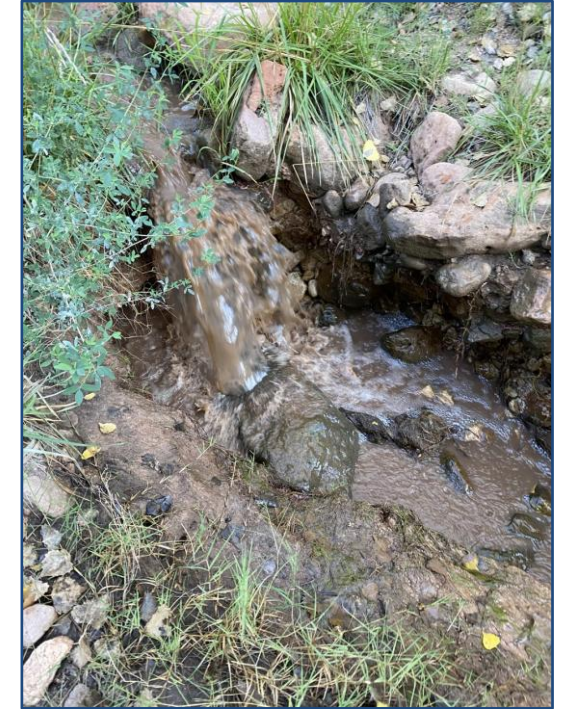
Drain Manifolds — If You Must, Do It Right

- The default is still one drain → one line → the separator
- A shared manifold is acceptable **ONLY** when it's engineered:
 - OVERSIZE it — $\geq 2"$ pipe for a handful of drains (not $\frac{1}{2}"$ tube)
 - VENT it to atmosphere — an unpressurized manifold = zero back-pressure on every drain
 - SLOPE it continuously to the OWS — no traps, no uphill lifts
 - Enter from the TOP — each drain through its own fitting
 - Keep each drain's isolation valve so it can be serviced live
- Never tee pressurized drain discharges into a small common tube — back-pressure can hold the upstream drains shut



Installation Best Practices — Separators (OWS)

- **Oil-free ≠ drain-safe — test before you assume**
 - Oil-free compressors still carry ambient hydrocarbons & intake dust — it's still wastewater
 - Sample it; meet local POTW limits (often 10–15 ppm; EPA 40 CFR 279 caps oil at 40 ppm) — treat if it exceeds
 - EPA 40 CFR 403.5(b)(2): discharge below pH 5.0 is prohibited — oil-free condensate can fail on acidity alone (ref: CABP, “Achieving Technically Oil-Free Compressed Air”)
- **Feed the separator by gravity — below the drain points, sloped inlet, properly vented**
 - Never push condensate uphill into the OWS under compressed-air pressure
- Contain it: leaky OWS housings are common — set the unit in secondary containment / a drip tray
- Alarm it: most OWS have NO overfull alarm — add a high-level float so a plugged bed can't overflow oil
- Add an outlet sample / test port — verify effluent ppm on a schedule and keep the results



Untreated condensate dumped outdoors — a discharge violation waiting to happen

Maintenance & Monitoring

- Drains are wear items — not "install and forget"
- **Monthly: press the test button**
 - Confirm a short puff then a clean reseal; look & listen for a continuous air leak
- Quarterly / annual:
 - Clean strainers & chambers · rebuild or replace seals · verify float action
- **Know the failure signs**
 - Continuous hiss = failed open = wasted air
 - Water at tools or rising dryer dew point = failed closed = carryover
- Three alarms cover the whole train: drain fault → BMS · OWS high-level float · dryer dew-point rise — keep rebuild kits on hand



The TEST button + interval dials — a monthly press confirms it still puffs and reseals

Separators — Treating the Discharge

- The discharge is an oil/water emulsion — illegal to send to the sewer untreated
 - Clean Water Act & local POTW limits — commonly ≤ 10 mg/L (ppm) oil & grease
- **Oil/water separator: condensate flows through adsorption media (alumina-silicate) that grabs the oil and passes clean water**
 - Guaranteed to ≤ 10 ppm when properly sized, installed & registered (EPA methods 1664b, etc.)
- **Size by compressor CFM / HP and oil type — under sizing = oil breakthrough**
 - e.g. Clean Resources CRP-500 → 30–250 HP · CRP-2000 → up to ~800 HP
- **Maintain: change media on schedule; dispose of spent media & oil per regs; keep the registration paperwork**



Clean Resources oil/water separator line (session sponsor)

Sizing & Spec'ing — the Drain and the OWS

- **Pressure rating**
 - Rate the drain for maximum system pressure — standard bodies to ~250 psi; high-pressure versions to 4,000 psi
 - Zero-loss drains also list a MINIMUM pressure needed to eject condensate — check both ends of the spec
- **Orifice & valve size**
 - Small orifices are what clog with oil & scale — bigger is more forgiving; pilot-operated valves (~11 mm orifice) for high-load, dirty service
 - Know where the water is: aftercooler ≈ 55% of system condensate · refrigerated dryer ≈ 20% · wet receiver & pre-filter ≈ 10% each — size each point for its share
- **Drain settings**
 - Timers: ON just long enough to clear the water, OFF matched to season & load — summer can make 5× winter's condensate
 - Zero-loss: no settings to get wrong — but wire the fault output
- **Oil/Water Separator**
 - Size by total CFM/HP AND climate AND lubricant type — polyglycol vs. mineral vs. synthetic need different media; confirm with the OWS maker
 - The OWS is an UNPRESSURIZED vessel — feed it through its depressurization/vent chamber; never dead-head a pressurized drain line into it

Tricks & Traps from the Field

- Manifolded drains — four into one ½" line: back-pressure held the receiver drain shut → carryover to the dryer
- Factory-default timer (5 s / 1 min) on a dry plant → thousands of \$/yr of air wasted
- Float drain after an oil-flooded screw: sludge locked it open → a continuous leak no one heard
- Zero-loss drain with no isolation valve → servicing meant shutting the plant, so it never got serviced
- Separator undersized / media never changed → oil breakthrough to the city sewer (a compliance problem)



Field finds: a manual valve bypassing the drain to a bucket (top) · a bypass teed around a drain — one cracked valve from a 24/7 leak (bottom)



Case Study 1 — What a Timer Drain Really Costs

Annual cost of blown air, per drain — $125 \text{ psig} \cdot \frac{1}{4}'' \text{ orifice} \approx 98 \text{ CFM while open} \cdot \$0.35 / 1,000 \text{ ft}^3$

OFF (min) \ ON (sec)	0.5 s	1 s	2 s	5 s	10 s
0.5 min	\$296	\$582	\$1,127	\$2,575	\$4,507
1 min	\$149	\$296	\$582	\$1,387	\$2,575
2 min	\$75	\$149	\$296	\$721	\$1,387
5 min	\$30	\$60	\$119	\$296	\$582
10 min	\$15	\$30	\$60	\$149	\$296

- **Factory default — 5 s ON / 1 min OFF: \$1,387 per drain, per year**
- **Tuned to the actual load — 2 s ON / 5 min OFF: \$119 / yr**
- **Zero-loss drain: ≈ \$0 — and multiply the difference by every timer drain in the plant**

Case Study 2 — “No-Loss” Drains That Weren't

The Assumption

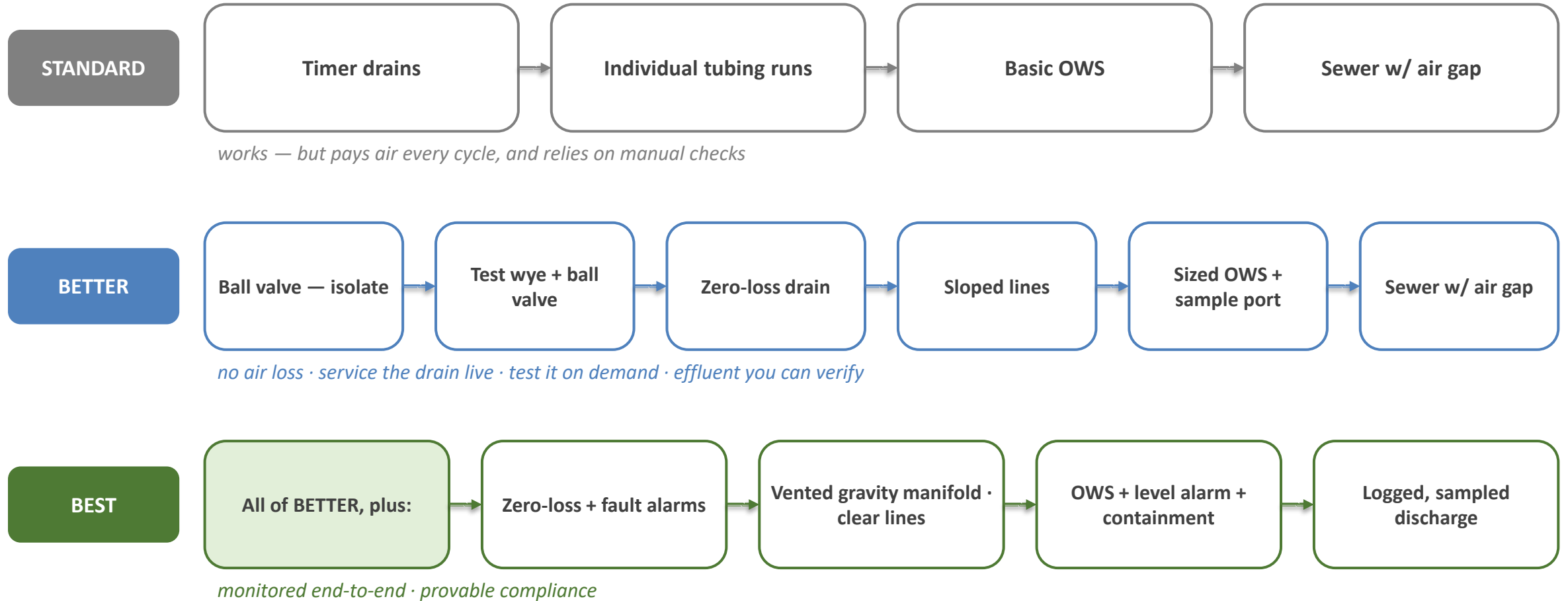
- Real audit: glass plant — 35 drains across 7 compressors & dryers
- Plant standardized on “no-loss” (NLAD) drains — air loss booked as \$0
- Drains “didn’t work well” → balance lines left open to atmosphere = continuous purge
- Two “drains” were nothing but open pipe

What the Audit Found

- 32 of 35 “no-loss” drains bleeding air 24/7 — $\approx 4,330 \text{ kWh} \approx \$270 / \text{yr}$ each
- Plant total: $15.8 \text{ kW} \cdot 138,588 \text{ kWh} / \text{yr} \approx \$10,800 / \text{yr}$
- Fix: true no-loss drains — $29 \times \$400 = \$11,600$, minus \$200/drain utility rebate
- Payback: 1.07 years

RESULT: “No-loss” on the nameplate isn’t no-loss in the field — walk your drains and check where the balance line goes.

Condensate Architecture — Standard → Better → Best



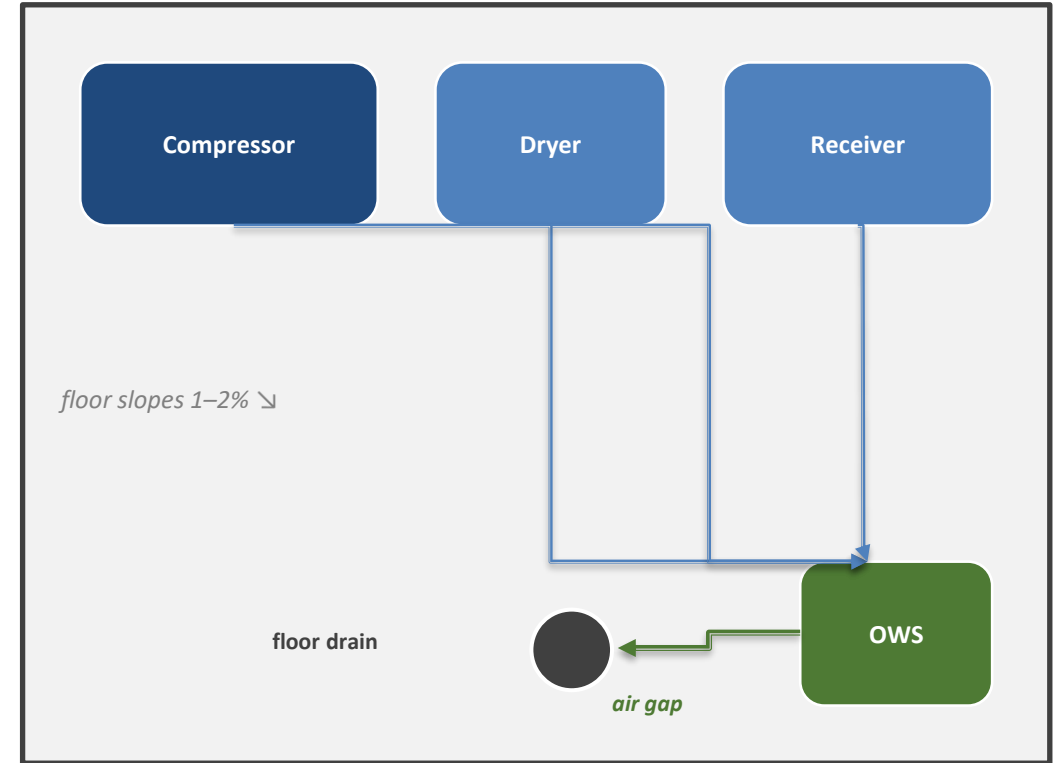
KEY TAKEAWAY: *Climb one tier at a time — each step pays for itself in air, uptime, and compliance.*

System Design Best Practices

- Take air off the TOP of the header — swan-neck / gooseneck takeoffs keep condensate in the main, out of the drops
 - Bottom takeoffs feed water and oil straight down to the tool; an upside-down plumbing trap
- Slope every main ~1% ($\approx 1/8"$ per ft) toward designated low points — in a looped system, make the corners the low points
- Full-size drip legs at every low point — header ends, loop corners, before & after the dryer — each with a zero-loss drain
- Knock out the bulk at the compressor — intercoolers, aftercooler + moisture separator before condensate reaches the distribution system
- Design a gravity path to a correctly-sized oil/water separator — no lifts, no pushing uphill under air pressure
- Size dry storage so drains aren't overwhelmed during big demand events; default to zero-loss drains

Compressor Room Design — Plan the Floor Drain

- Put a floor drain (or trench) in the room at design time
 - Retrofitting one later means saw-cutting concrete — cheapest insurance you'll ever pour
- Slope the floor 1–2% to the drain • set equipment on housekeeping pads
- Condensate NEVER goes to the floor drain directly
 - Every drain point → OWS → then the floor drain, through an AIR GAP
- Locate the OWS low, next to the drain, with service clearance
 - Containment under the OWS — the sloped floor + drain become your spill protection
- Verify with local POTW / plumbing code: sample port, backflow, permit



Compressor room — plan view

Design & Selection Checklist

- Identify every low point — put a drain at each one
- Default to zero-loss electronic where air cost matters
 - Float for clean, light-duty points · timer only as a sized backup
- **Individual drain lines + isolation valves — no shared headers**
- Relieve pressure first — vented manifold or the OWS's depressurization chamber — then into a correctly-sized oil/water separator
- Wire fault outputs to an alarm / BMS
- Put drains on the PM schedule; stock rebuild kits
- Keep separator sizing & EPA registration documentation on file

Resources & References

- **CAGI — Compressed Air & Gas Institute** — cagi.org
 - Industry standards, CAGI performance data sheets, Compressed Air & Gas Handbook
- **Compressed Air Challenge (CAGI Education Foundation)** — compressedairchallenge.org
 - Fundamentals & Advanced training; "Improving Compressed Air System Performance" sourcebook
- **U.S. DOE — Compressed Air Systems** — energy.gov/cmei
 - Free tip sheets: "Remove Condensate with Minimal Air Loss," "Maintaining System Air Quality"; AIRMaster+ / MEASUR tools
- **Compressed Air Best Practices Magazine** — airbestpractices.com
 - Trade articles & case studies on condensate, drains, oil/water separators & air treatment
- **ASHRAE** — ashrae.org
 - Psychometrics, dew point & refrigeration standards behind dryer and condensate design

Summary & Contact

- Condensate is unavoidable — the drain is a small part doing a big job
 - Failed open = wasted air · failed closed = water & oil downstream
- Drain types, worst → best: manual < timer < float < zero-loss
- **Install for access: isolate, don't manifold, separate before discharge**
- **Maintain & monitor — test buttons and fault alarms catch failures early**



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-System & Control Design
-Leak Detection
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KEY TAKEAWAY: *Right drain, right install, treated discharge, monitored — that's condensate you never have to think about.*



Thank You!

Thank you to **CABP** for hosting — and to **Clean Resources** for sponsoring this session

cleanresources.com — oil/water separators for compressor condensate



- System & Control Design
- Leak Detection
- System Evaluation and Optimization
- Process Side Consulting



Clean Resources



About the Speaker



Chad Timmer
Clean Resources

- Vice President of Sales, Clean Resources
- In compressed air since 2011
- Started with a Quincy distributor in Michigan
- Hands-on background from his father's tool and die shop



Do You Know...

What an Oil-Water Separator actually does?
The EPA mandate on condensate discharge levels?
How much condensate your compressor produces?

Chad Timmer — Vice President of Sales



Today's Discussion

- ❖ Purpose of the Oil-Water Separator
- ❖ EPA mandate
- ❖ How much condensate does my compressor produce?
- ❖ Food manufacturing company
- ❖ Oil-Water Separator — an insurance policy
- ❖ Small manufacturing company and OSHA
- ❖ ISO audit in Detroit
- ❖ Local code enforcement



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Purpose of the Oil-Water Separator

Condensate Management and the EPA Mandate



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Oil Carryover = Oil-to-Air Ratio

Concentration of oil in the compressed air

1 – 2 ppm Oil in Air = 300 – 600 ppm in Condensate

COMPRESSOR CONDENSATE

EPA has mandated

Condensate cannot exceed 50 ppm



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How much condensate does
my compressor produce?



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Food **Manufacturing** Company



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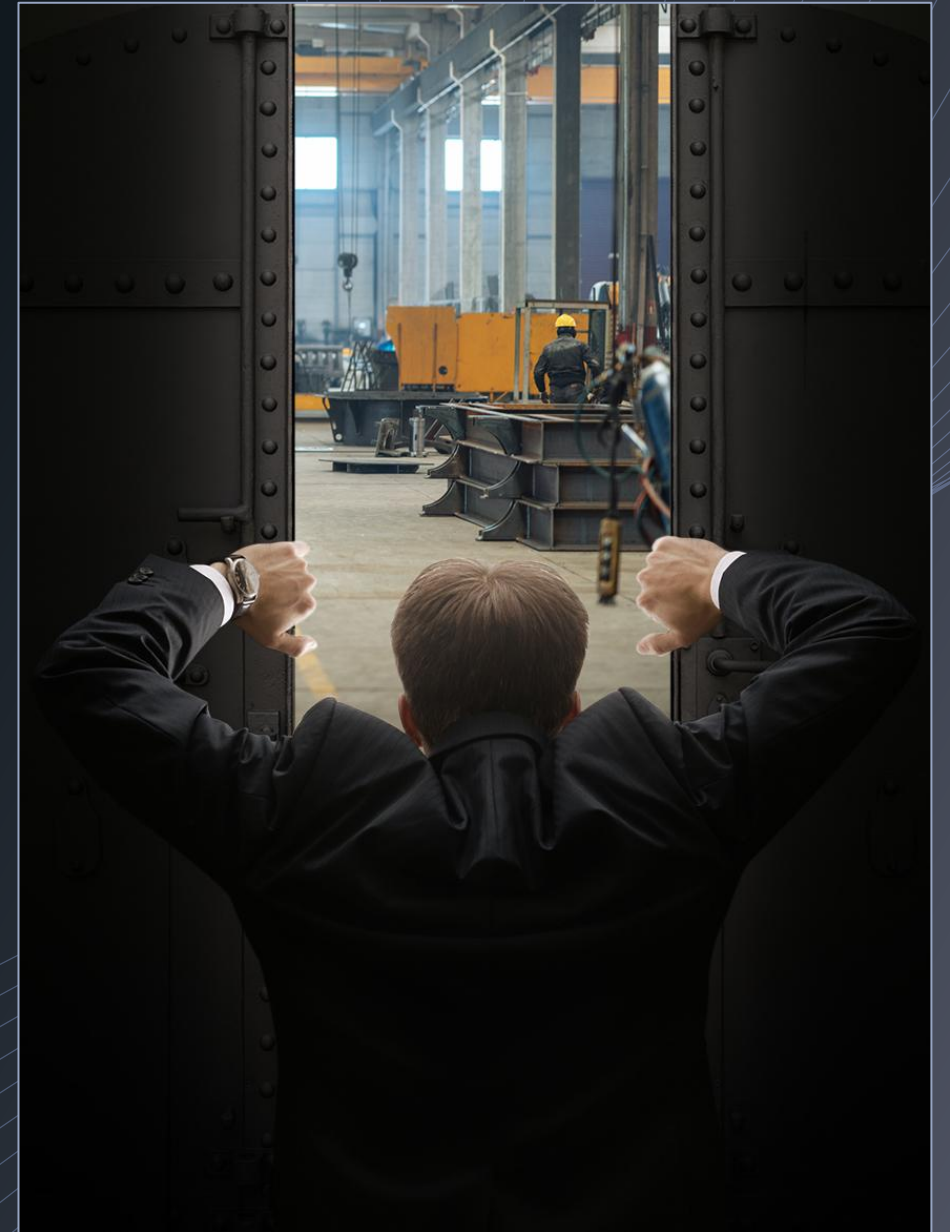
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Who am I **at risk** from?

- ❖ EPA
- ❖ Local Code Enforcement
- ❖ OSHA
- ❖ ISO/TS Audits



Oil-Water Separator an **insurance** policy



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Small manufacturing company and OSHA



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ISO audit in Detroit



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Local code enforcement



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What does a failed-closed condensate
drain cause?

A

- Wasted air

B

- Water & oil
carryover

C

- Noise increase

Condensate Management Drains, Separators and Compliance Strategies

Q&A

Please submit any questions through the Question Window on your GoToWebinar interface, directing them to Best Practices Magazine. Our panelists will do their best to address your questions and will follow up with you on anything that goes unanswered during this session.

Thank you for attending!



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