

Explosion near Allentown heard for miles

Five workers killed in Pennsylvania chemical blast

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Five workers were killed February 19 when a powerful explosion ripped through a small chemical factory in a suburb of the city of Allentown in eastern Pennsylvania. The explosion occurred around 8:30 p.m. Fourteen people were injured, including five firefighters who had come to the scene. Two of these remain in critical condition in nearby hospitals.

The 40,000-square-foot facility belonging to Concept Sciences Inc. in the Lehigh Valley Industrial Park was completely destroyed. The blast created a 4-foot crater in the cement floor and blew out three 25-foot high walls, causing the concrete ceiling to collapse. Chunks of debris were hurled hundreds of yards and insulation was found as far as five miles away.

The force of the explosion caused cracks in the wall of an adjacent building 100 yards away, and broke windshields and caved in the roofs of cars in the parking lot. Windows in nearby homes were broken. Residents of the neighborhood said they thought a plane had crashed at the nearby airport.

Concept Sciences, established just two years ago, uses potassium hydroxide to distill a substance called hydroxylamine, used in a number of industrial, pharmaceutical and other synthetic products. The company had rented the building within the last year and had been renovating and refitting it in preparation for moving there from its current location in nearby Allentown.

Four of the five victims worked for Concept Sciences. Lehigh County Coroner Scott Grim identified the dead as: Anthony Mondello Sr., 57, of Pen Argyl; his son, Paul Mondello, 25, of Easton; Ruben Soto Sr., 52, of Bethlehem; and Paul Wanamaker, 43, of Northampton. The fifth worker killed was Terry

Bowers, 48, of Allentown. Bowers was a manager of a vending machine company who had been called in to fix a broken machine.

In addition to those killed and injured, the explosion released a cloud of noxious smoke that left a white powder covering homes and cars. Authorities with the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Administration (PEMA) are still trying to determine the exact content of the cloud and the white powder, but they say it is not toxic. About 80 firefighters and other rescue workers at the scene were decontaminated with a water and soap solution.

Authorities speculated that the explosion was triggered during the distillation of hydroxylamine with potassium hydroxide. However federal and state investigators said that the exact cause of the explosion will take weeks to determine, if not longer.

An attorney for the company, Stanley Margle, said, "We are just as confounded and confused as everyone else is as to what could have caused this explosion. There is no chemical or any other product in our plant that itself or in compound with something else in our plant could have caused this explosion."

However both chemicals, hydroxylamine and potassium hydroxide, are corrosives. Mary Gail Hutchins, a chemistry professor at Drexel University and a hazardous materials specialist, told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that the chemical compound is a pungent smelling derivative of ammonia that takes the form of white flakes at room temperature.

"If they had the dry powder around, it could explode," said Hutchins. Although the compound was known to be explosive, there may have been a heat source to ignite it--perhaps a misplaced hotplate or Bunsen

burner.

In September 1997 a far smaller explosion at Concept Sciences' Allentown facility blew off a 5-foot-tall plastic water cylinder.

Concept Sciences is the type of small business that Lehigh County seeks to attract to replace jobs eliminated by the downsizing of industrial giants like Bethlehem Steel and Mack Truck, which once employed tens of thousands in the region. The 1,600-acre Lehigh Valley Industrial Park is the site of more than 300 such companies.

Janice Nisbet, the Public Affairs director for Lehigh County, described the area as one in "transition." Nisbet could not say whether any special tax or other benefits were given to Concept Sciences for moving in, but she explained that the county offers many such incentives. "Bethlehem Steel just closed its factory here," she said. "We are transitioning here from large manufacturing to small and mid-size companies. We have the largest reclamation project in the country, which is turning former industrial sites into other uses. We have a lot to offer companies that relocate here."

Concept Sciences describes itself as the first US manufacturer and supplier of free-base hydroxylamine, which is used in the etching process of making computer chips, for antibiotics, tranquilizers and other drugs, herbicides, insecticides, plastics, rubber and paints.

A spokesperson for the Occupational Safety and Healthy Administration in Pittsburgh was unfamiliar with the safety record of Concept Sciences and explained that due to budget cuts and the large number of small businesses that it is unlikely that any inspections would have been carried out at its plant.



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