

# Deadly explosion at Texas oil refinery part of a broader pattern

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On Wednesday afternoon, an explosion ripped through a BP oil refinery in Texas City, Texas, killing 15 workers and injuring over 100. This was the latest in a series of deadly accidents at the BP plant and other facilities on the Texas coast of the Gulf of Mexico, near Houston.

The massive fire from the explosion sent plumes of smoke thousands of feet in the air. Residents up to five miles away said their homes were rattled by the blast, while ash and debris rained down on the nearby area. There has been no word yet on the exact cause of the accident.

There are about 1,800 workers at the plant, which processes 433,000 barrels of crude oil a day, about 3 percent of the total US supply. It is the country's third largest oil refinery. Those who were most directly affected by the explosion were workers with a private contractor, J.E. Merit Constructors Inc. They were working in a part of the plant known as the isomerization unit, which processes gasoline to increase the octane level.

Wenceslado de la Cerda, 50, told the Associated Press, "Basically, it was one big boom. It's a shame that people have to get killed and hurt trying to make a dollar in these plants, but that's part of reality." Judith Mantell, 62, said that flames from the fire shot 70 feet into the air.

Dixie Walker said that the explosion was so intense that it blew off the uniform of his nephew, who works at the plant. "He was sitting there in his boots and underwear when the rescue team found him," Walker told the *Houston Chronicle*.

In addition to the injuries resulting immediately from the explosion, local health officials are also concerned about the possibility that contaminants could have been released into the air by the fire. One of the main

concerns is the chemical naphtha, a solvent that can cause nausea and headaches, and when burned can release carcinogens. Several nearby residents complained of sickness shortly after the blast, though initial tests did not show evidence of high levels of pollutants.

Keissha McFarland was at a nearby home at the time of the explosion. Her friend, Wallace Christian, told the *Galveston County Daily News*, "The plant just blew up, and the windows got blown in on her. She got exposed to whatever it is in the air," Christian said, "and she started feeling sick and throwing up."

Texas City has a population of about 40,000, and is located 35 miles southeast of Houston. Its economy and skyline are dominated by the giant refinery plants that employ the bulk of the city's workers. Residents are subject to the constant smell and noise that emanates from the plants, which are also a major source of pollution. The BP plant alone released over 5 million pounds of pollutants in 2002, making it the state's eighth greatest polluter.

Residents in houses nearest the plants are most affected, and some have difficulty moving because they are unable to find anyone to buy their homes. According to the *Houston Chronicle*, one local resident Ray Alvarez complained that noise from the BP plant disrupts their lives 24 hours a day. "We're doing everything we can to get out of here, but nobody wants to buy this house, just because of things like this today," he told the *Chronicle*, referring to Wednesday's explosion.

Judy Minter, 58, said that living in Texas City is "like living in a place with a lot of hurricanes. You can't live in constant fear, but you are always aware" of the danger of an explosion.

The accident on Wednesday was not an isolated event

at the BP plant. Robert Crowe of the *Houston Chronicle* outlined a number of the previous accidents at the facility (“BP plant has costly history of safety incidents,” March 24). In September 2004, two employees at the facility were burned to death and another was injured after superheated water was accidentally released from a valve. The failure of the company to ensure that the pipes were properly relieved of pressure was determined by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to be a “willful violation” of industrial regulations. BP was fined \$110,000 over the incident.

Speaking of the September accident, Houston South Area Director of OSHA, Charles Williams, said, “BP North America has years of experience in handling hazardous materials. If OSHA standards had been followed, this tragic loss of life might have been avoided.”

Only six months earlier, in March 2004, an explosion forced the evacuation of the plant, though fortunately no one was killed or injured. BP was fined a paltry \$63,000 for 14 safety violations, which included deficiencies in its emergency shutdown system. The accident occurred after a pipe ruptured, releasing flammable gasses that led to a series of explosions.

Williams said of that accident that it demonstrated a “disregard for worker protection” on the part of BP.

“In July 1995,” Crowe writes, “an explosion rocked the Texas City facility, named Amoco at the time. No one was seriously injured but at least 105 people were taken to local hospitals with breathing problems and burning eyes.... In 1994, Amoco Oil Co. agreed to pay \$20 million in damages to the family of a worker who died after an April 1992 explosion at the Texas City plant.”

Other plants in the region have experienced similar accidents and explosions. In March 2000, an explosion and fire tore through a Phillips Petroleum Company chemical plant in nearby Pasadena, Texas, killing one and injuring 71. In July 1990 an explosion at Arco Chemical Plant in Channelview killed 17. In October 1989, an explosion at a Phillips Petroleum plastics plant, also in Pasadena, killed 23.

Besides small fines, none of these incidents have led to serious changes in the safety standards at the petroleum plants throughout the region.

Texas City is also the location of the worst single

industrial accident in US history—the 1947 explosion of a transport ship that contained massive amounts of ammonia nitrite fertilizer. That explosion killed 576 people and injured over 5,000.



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