

One year since the West, Texas chemical blast

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On Thursday night, the town of West, Texas held a memorial to mark a year since a devastating fertilizer plant explosion killed 15 people and injured hundreds. A year later, in spite of a record of safety violations at the plant, no one has been held responsible for the tragedy and an investigation into the causes has been virtually shut down.

Members of the community gathered at the local fairgrounds to grieve and commemorate the dead. In addition to the 15 killed, over 200 residents were hurt by the blast, which was so immense it registered as a 2.1 magnitude earthquake. At 7:51 PM a moment of silence was observed to mark the exact time of the blast.

The town of 2,800 has been seriously scarred by the event. More than 150 buildings were either damaged or totally destroyed by the explosion. Several schools had to be shut down because of the damage, with students relocated to other facilities. A nursing home and several stores were forced to close for repairs.

The blast was compared to a bomb. It left a mushroom cloud over the site, shattered windows for two miles and could be heard over forty miles away. More than seven percent of the population of the town was injured. The mayor, Tommy Muska, told the *Associated Press*, “A lot of them have suffered some type of post-traumatic stress of some sort... I am definitely concerned. We are not going to lose sight of that.”

The absence of the fertilizer plant has also taken its toll, as it was central to the town’s economy. West is seeking to negotiate the establishment of a new plant, potentially a flag manufacturer or recycling facility. There is opposition among residents to calls for rebuilding the fertilizer plant.

West has a donation-based long-term recovery fund, which due to an outpouring of sympathy and support grew to \$3.6 million dollars. Only some of this money

has actually been paid out, however. According to *Nola.com*, money has been delayed “as organizers deal with unforeseen paperwork and federal regulations.”

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) originally denied funds to the town, arguing that the repairs were “within the capabilities of the state and affected local governments.” Under political pressure from Texas Governor Rick Perry, FEMA’s decision was reversed and the blast at West declared a “major disaster.” FEMA is now supposed to reimburse the town for up to \$1.3 million.

These funds, adding up to \$4.9 million, are not even half of what is needed simply to repair damaged infrastructure. CNN reports: “According to local officials, the city is still well short of the \$17 million it needs to repair roads, water and sewage lines and other damaged infrastructure.”

In contrast to the response of the government, there has been an outpouring of support from ordinary people for the town and the victims of the disaster. Volunteer crews have donated their time to help people repair and rebuild their homes. The Long-Term Recovery Center’s construction chief, John Raimer, is an itinerant construction expert who is aiding the town for free, living out of a trailer and relying on his pension.

As with other disaster scenarios, the West explosion was initially met with speeches and token expressions of sympathy by President Obama, and given ample news coverage. Now, a year later, the community is left to pick up the pieces with inadequate funds.

The explosion was neither uncommon nor unforeseen. According to the *Huffington Post*, in 2012, 1,270 people were killed “in over 30,000 chemical spills and accidents.”

The Occupational Safety Hazard Administration (OSHA), which is in charge of overseeing workplace safety, has been gutted by years of budget cuts. OSHA is in charge of monitoring roughly seven million work

sites. However, it is able to visit only a tiny fraction, 40,000, of those sites. According to the *Huffington Post*, using OSHA's existing staff it would take more than 90 years to "conduct even cursory inspections of all eligible workplaces in Texas."

According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, the West Fertilizer Company, which existed for 51 years, routinely violated safety codes. In 1985, multiple "serious" violations were noted. In 2006, it was fined by the Environmental Protection Agency for "failing to update a risk management plan," among other violations. Later in 2006, the company was fined again for lacking permits and for plans to unsafely transport dangerous chemicals.

One year after the disaster, the owner of the company remains free, having incurred no fine or criminal investigation. The probe into the disaster virtually ended a month after the blast.

Thousands of people die annually from accidents such as the one in West, Texas. There are no plans to improve OSHA. Quite the contrary. The agency's staffing and budget were further reduced last year as part of the sequester cuts, which have now been made permanent. Workplaces around the country are ticking time bombs—a slowly unfolding crime that will undoubtedly claim many more lives.



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