

West, Texas explosion and deaths called “preventable”

Matthew MacEgan
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Just days after the first anniversary of the fertilizer explosion in West, Texas, the US Chemical and Safety Board (CSB) released a report detailing their investigation of the disaster.

According to the federal agency, the April 17, 2013 blast that destroyed a large section of the town, killed 15 people, injured 236 others, and left fantastic scars on the community was completely “preventable.” It resulted from a combination of faulty planning and negligence by both local and state officials, according to the CSB.

The explosion occurred when the West Fertilizer Company’s supply of ammonium nitrate caught fire. The chemical, which was the main catalyst in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, was kept in wooden barrels inside a wooden building that had no fire safety devices such as sprinklers. In other countries, like the United Kingdom, ammonium nitrate must be kept in one-story, well-ventilated buildings, constructed of concrete, brick or steel. No such guidelines exist in the United States.

The CSB’s supervisory investigator, Johnnie Banks, told reporters that “a patchwork of federal and state regulations with huge gaps... allowed this accident to happen.”

The tragedy resulted not merely from the shoddy storage facilities used by the owners of the plant, however. The CSB also placed blame on McLennan County officials who had failed to create an emergency plan in the event of such an explosion.

According to the CSB report, state officials mistakenly determined that the facility was exempt from emergency plan requirements. The state of Texas, in fact, actually prohibits small counties like McLennan from creating basic and essential fire codes. Without such codes, fire officials have no means of keeping industrial operators accountable for their actions. The

CSB explained that these facts “left emergency responders and residents unprepared for what occurred on April 17.”

These problems go beyond just the town of West, Texas. According to Banks, all levels of government are failing to keep populated areas away from such facilities. He explained in an interview that the agency found 1,351 facilities in the United States storing ammonium nitrate, many of which are located in farming communities where the chemical is kept in close proximity to homes and schools. Reportedly, many of these facilities also store ammonium nitrate in wooden bins.

Another factor that contributed to the high number of deaths during the blast was the inadequate training of local fire officials in responding to ammonium nitrate explosions. Guidelines set by the National Fire Protection Association and the US Department of Transportation recommend that firefighters evacuate the immediate area surrounding “massive” ammonium nitrate fires and fight such blazes from a “distance.” Such vague terminology would have provided little guidance to officials, even if they had been made aware of these guidelines.

Due to inadequate training and lack of knowledge, West’s volunteer firefighters were taking up defensive positions at a nearby apartment building when the explosion erupted. The blast, which was measured as a 2.1 magnitude event on seismographs, killed 12 of those volunteers instantly.

Some 85 percent of the nation’s fire departments are run by volunteers, yet there are no federal requirements for such departments to create and implement site-specific pre-incident plans with operators of chemical plants like the one in West, Texas.

CSB Chairman Rafael Moure-Eraso wrote in a

statement that these government agencies “have work to do because this hazard exists in hundreds of locations across the US.” He added, “It is important to note that there is no substitute for an efficient regulatory system that ensures that all companies are operating to the same high standards. We cannot depend on voluntary compliance.”

Moure-Eraso told reporters that he believes the Environmental Protection Agency and Occupational Safety and Health Administration have the capability of instituting greater safety measures and standards for regulatory oversight of such storage facilities. However, both agencies have failed to address the recommendations of the CSB each time they have been stressed.

Despite the harsh truths being expounded by the CSB, the agency has no authority to issue fines or citations to any of the parties involved. The agency with whom this authority rests, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), has stated that its investigation into the cause of the fire is still ongoing.

In the weeks following the explosion last year, the ATF stonewalled the CSB’s investigation of the West Fertilizer Plant explosion, only allowing investigators to enter the facility after weeks had passed and much of the physical evidence had been tampered with or removed from the site.

The damage done to the community goes much further than the unnecessary deaths and injuries caused by the explosion. The fertilizer plant served as the economic backbone of the community, and the rebuilding of any kind of replacement manufacturing industry has met with harsh skepticism by local families who fear for their own safety.



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