

# Three Wisconsin workers die in corn mill explosion, several more seriously injured

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An explosion at a Cambria, Wisconsin corn mill and ethanol plant Wednesday night took the life of three workers and injured nearly a dozen.

Rescuers from two dozen fire departments of surrounding communities responded to the explosion and subsequent fires as well as the aftermath, digging through a mountain of debris from the flattened facility in search of injured and dead workers.

The three victims were identified Friday as mill operator Duelle Block, fork lift driver Robert Goodenow and packing machine operator Pawel Tordoff. Friends of Block's girlfriend quickly set up a GoFundMe page to assist her with the expenses for the 13-month-old daughter he left behind.

The cause of the blast at the Didion Milling Plant in the community of about 770 people 47 miles northeast of Madison, the state capital, remains unknown. Investigators from the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) arrived on the scene Thursday to begin an investigation into the blast.

Spokesmen for the company reported that 16 workers were in the mill at the time of the explosion. Didion employs approximately 227 workers in Cambria and at other facilities in nearby counties.

Five workers were airlifted to the University of Wisconsin Hospital in Madison, where four were admitted to the burn unit, and the fifth person placed in the intensive care and life support unit. Other injured workers were taken to Portage hospital nearby, where one was admitted to the intensive care unit, and another airlifted to the University Hospital and also placed in the burn unit.

Didion Vice President of Operations Derrick Clark issued a perfunctory statement in the immediate aftermath of the explosion, "The safety and security of our employees is our top priority. Over the past 44

years, the Didion team has grown to be a close knit family, and we ask for your prayers during this difficult time."

Phone calls and emails by members of the press to the plant went unanswered, however the company announced on its web site that the plant would be closed until further notice.

OSHA and other federal agencies have cited Didion Mills for multiple safety and environmental violations as far back as the early 2000s.

In January 2011 the company was cited for exposing workers to excessive amounts of dust and for failing to install systems to protect the workers against the risk of a dust explosion, a genuine hazard in grain handling enclosures, such as mills and silos. Purdue University, which tracks fatalities from grain dust explosions, reported five having occurred in the United States last year, killing two workers.

The OSHA report from the 2011 inspection noted that Didion did not maintain its mill "free from recognized hazards that caused or were likely to cause death or serious harm. Employees were exposed to the hazards associated with dust explosion, deflagration, or other fire hazards."

That year OSHA found that six filters placed in the plant to collect dust were not equipped with systems to protect against explosions and the conveyor systems transporting corn grain were not correctly ducted to adequately diminish airborne particulate matter.

Didion was instructed to fix the cited problems by April, 2011. OSHA ultimately closed the case in September 2013 after the company paid a paltry fine of \$3,465. The company received no further OSHA citations thereafter.

In 2010, Didion agreed to pay \$1.05 million to the Wisconsin Department of Justice to settle lawsuits that

alleged the company violated state clean air and water regulations regards emissions from its plants into the air and into neighboring streams and lakes. A month later, Democratic Governor Jim Doyle announced that Wisconsin had been awarded \$14.5 million in federal stimulus money for so-called green energy projects, \$5.6 million of which went to Didion Mills to significantly expand its corn milling and ethanol production.

The US Environmental Protection Agency had already referred to Didion as “a high priority violator” that had violated the federal Clean Water Act many times in 2008-2009, using excessive amounts of chlorine and other chemicals that found their way into water systems nearby. Cambria residents complained of noxious smells and that a murky yellow liquid with semi-solids were piped from the plant directly into a stream which fed a nearby lake.

The 2010 settlement with the Wisconsin DOJ swept away 23 air and water pollution claims from 1999 to 2010 and also ended three federal lawsuits filed by nearby Cambria residents that put the company at risk for a potential added \$22 million fine.

When Didion Mills applied for the corn gas stimulus package, US officials overseeing the grants did not ask about previous environmental or OSHA safety violations. Nor did Didion disclose the citations, or whether compliance to plant safety recommendations by OSHA had been carried out.

According to a WisconsinWatch article published November 29, 2010, once Didion received the federal stimulus grant, the company obtained a categorical exemption from any environmental assessment and review of its subsequent practices for which the money was used. This understanding between big business and the Obama Energy Department proved true for 99% of the \$33 billion handed out to other energy companies.

Ironically in 2010, Didion Mills won a Wisconsin State Department of Commerce Profitability Sustainability Initiative Grant to examine and reduce polluting emissions. That fall, the company hosted a Green Energy Expo, providing recycling and energy saving tips. In that same period, the federal EPA had handed Didion 11 notices of violation of EPA statutes in the previous five years.

During the Obama years, the White House Council on Environmental Quality oversaw the distribution of

some 8,117 DOE federal grants, virtually of all which were exempted from detailed environment and safety impacts. Boeing Aerospace, for example, won a federal contract for \$15.9 million to ostensibly clean up a creek for which the company had been fined \$471,000 for polluting.



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