

# Two workers killed in molten slag spill at Tampa, Florida power plant

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On Thursday, two workers at an electrical plant near Tampa, Florida were killed horrifically when a tank spilled molten slag onto them. Four others were hospitalized with life-threatening injuries. The plant is operated by Tampa Electric Company (TECO), the Tampa Bay area's largest electrical utility service. The company was purchased exactly one year ago to the day by Canadian energy company Emera Inc.

Christopher Irvin, 40, and Michael McCory, 60, were both killed, while Gary Marine Jr., 32, Antonio Navarrete, 21, Frank Lee Jones, 55, and Armando J. Perez, 56, all sustained life-threatening injuries. Only one of the men was a TECO employee while the other five were employees of Gaffin Industrial Services who were contracted to work at the plant.

According to reports and accounts that have emerged over the last few days, a 911 call was placed just before 4:30 p.m. to Hillsborough County Fire Rescue about a possible explosion at the Big Bend power plant located in Apollo Beach, Florida.

While no identifying information was initially reported, media showed that two victims of the accident were taken to a hospital by helicopter while two others were taken by ambulance. Two others were reported dead within the facility.

A TECO spokesperson reported that at the time of the incident workers were performing routine maintenance on a slag tank—a container which houses coal waste after it has been burned. Slag is a glass-like substance that forms when hot coal mixes with water; the slag tank catches leftover by-product that drips down from a coal-fired furnace into water.

The crystallized slag is still molten hot when it forms, and it was slag spillover that killed and injured the workers in question. An expert compared the gushing slag to “what comes out of a volcano.”

Workers were reportedly trying to unplug a hole in the slag tank when the material spilled out. A spokesperson from TECO stated that slag filled a large part of the floor in the plant, “6 inches deep and 40 feet in diameter.”

The Big Bend power plant spans approximately 1,500 acres and is the largest of TECO's three electrical plants. TECO and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) are collaborating to investigate what happened at the plant. An OSHA response is typical when there are work-related deaths or hospitalizations.

An OSHA spokesperson stated in response to the incident, “It's the employer's responsibility to provide a safe and healthful workplace.” Apparently, OSHA was already investigating a chemical exposure that happened at the same plant on May 24. This incident involved the release of anhydrous ammonia that caused four employees to be hospitalized.

TECO has a long history of similar incidents.

In 2010, a TECO lineman died from electric shock after making contact with a power line, causing OSHA to hand TECO a wrist-slap fine of a mere \$6,300.

A deadly explosion at TECO's Port Sutton plant in 1999 killed three and injured 50, bringing a fine of \$25,000 to the company, less than \$472 per worker killed or injured. In 1997, four employees were injured when hot slag spewed from a tank, causing first- and second-degree burns. In 2002, conveyor belts caught fire in the same plant, sending seven employees to be treated for mild smoke inhalation. In 2014, a 31-year-old worker died after falling 40 feet from a catwalk, again at the same plant.

Emera Inc. of Nova Scotia acquired TECO Energy, which includes Tampa Electric, for \$10.4 billion last year. This deal pushed Emera onto a list of the top 20

North American regulated utility companies, overseeing operations in Canada, Maine, Florida, New Mexico and the Caribbean.

An Emera spokesperson stated that “this is a heartbreaking moment for all of us.” The corporation has hired a public relations firm in St. Petersburg, Florida, which neighbors Tampa, to help cover up the deadly slag spill.

There have been other similar accidents in the area in recent years. In 2015 an explosion at a MagneGas Corp. fuel facility in Tarpon Springs killed one employee and severely injured another. OSHA cited the company afterward on several violations, including lack of employee training on dealing with flammable environments and not requiring flame-retardant clothing. They paid a fine of \$52,045.

Family and former colleagues have reacted publicly to the incident. Steve Chamberland told local media, “I worked with Frank and I worked with Chris, so I used to work with them and I know their work ethic. The hardest workers they got is those two guys. Frank is ‘the guy.’ He’s the guy Gaffin would call if there was a tough job. Frank wouldn’t do anything but the tough jobs. And everyone at TECO would ask, ‘Frank’s coming right?’ because they knew what he did.”

IBEW Local 108, the local chapter of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers which legally represents a portion of the workers employed by TECO, issued a token statement on the accident Thursday expressing condolences.

The Local’s statement notes that the incident was entirely avoidable. “It’s time to listen to the employees,” it reads. “It’s time to stop using contractors to do ‘routine maintenance’ when the safety of this maintenance has been questioned by employees. It’s time to stop putting profit before safety. It’s time to truly put safety first.”

OSHA’s investigation is expected to last for several weeks.



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