

One worker killed, two injured in chemical plant explosion in Houston, Texas

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An explosion at a chemical plant in the Houston, Texas suburb of Crosby killed one worker and critically injured two others on Tuesday.

Workers fled from the KMCO plant in a panicked scrum after a tank of isobutylene ignited at about 10:45 a.m.; about 30,000 students in nearby schools were forced to lock down, and residents were ordered to shelter in place. The fire was fully extinguished after 4:00 p.m.

James “Bubba” Mangum, 27, was apparently trying to stop the explosion when he was killed. According to his family Mangum had just been promoted two weeks prior to the incident and had worked at KMCO for several years.

“Bubba was definitely one of the good guys. If I called him at 10 o’clock at night and needed help with something, he would be there. He was just the biggest-hearted, most generous 27-year-old kid you could ever meet,” friend and neighbor Kelvin Burks told *Bluebonnet News*. “He would go out of his way for his family and friends.”

“This morning, by habit, I looked out the window to see if he was home. It’s hard to believe we’ll never see him again,” Burks noted.

Workers were given little warning before Tuesday’s explosion, and some have described the communications from operators as “panicked.” Justin Trahan, who had been working within 100 feet of the tank that exploded, recounted to KHOU reporters that an operator initially instructed him and his colleagues to leave the building because of a “chemical release.”

Trahan stated that he heard “some panic on the radio” as he and his workers moved towards the doors. “We didn’t think anything of it—we didn’t think it was anything severe,” he told reporters. There were no alarms before the tank caught fire.

When Trahan and his coworkers realized that the tank had ignited, everyone made “a mad dash to the exits.” Upon discovering that the gates out of the plant were locked, Trahan and others were forced to jump a fence.

Randy Villalobos, another worker, gave a similar account to ABC KTRK: “Just run, that’s it. It was scary. Very scary. Everybody around me was running.”

Villalobos and about 20 others were forced to crawl underneath the locked gate.

Three workers, including Mangum who died at the plant, were unable to escape in time. The other two sustained severe burns and were taken by helicopter to local hospitals.

Crosby residents have reported hearing the explosion and feeling their houses shake. At least one person was knocked down by the force of the blast. Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez issued shelter-in-place orders to homes and schools within a one-mile radius of the plant, and firefighters from Houston, Crosby, and other municipalities worked for hours to contain the blaze.

The deadly explosion at KMCO is the second fire at a Houston-area chemical plant within little more than two weeks.

On March 17, a fire at the Intercontinental Terminals Company (ITC) chemical storage facility in Deer Park sent dark, carcinogenic clouds over Harris County. Thousands of people were forced to shelter in place for days as firefighters struggled to contain the fire.

Winds spread the noxious chemicals throughout East Texas over the next week, requiring air quality alerts. Toxic levels of benzene, a cancer-causing chemical, have been found in the Houston Ship Channel and the San Jacinto River. Residents have been told not to swim in the river or eat fish caught from either body of water.

Like ITC, KMCO is part of the sprawling

petrochemical industry in the Houston area. KMCO supplies brake fluid and antifreeze for use at nearby oil refineries. In a city with a long history of chemical plant explosions and refinery fires, KMCO stands out for its sheer defiance of even the laxest regulation.

According to records kept by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the company has been out of compliance with federal air and water standards for 36 out of the last 48 months. It amassed 54 violations with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) between 2010 and 2011; almost all were serious violations. OSHA fined KMCO more than \$200,000 in 2010 and 2011.

Violations included substandard chemical processing, improper handling of highly hazardous chemicals, and inadequate emergency plans. All of these issues likely played a role in Tuesday's explosion and the ensuing chaos.

Harris County is currently suing KMCO for air pollution, water pollution, and nuisance violations, with a court case scheduled for trial in June. In the aftermath of the explosion, Assistant Harris County Attorney Roc Owens told the press that the county could amend the case to seek a long-term closure of the facility.

Calling the plant "a thorn in our side," Owens said that the plant should not reopen until the EPA and the Texas Commission for Environmental Quality (TCEQ) have deemed it safe.

As one local news source stated, the company knows its way to court. Its parent company pleaded guilty to knowing and negligent violations of federal environmental laws. According to federal prosecutors, the company failed to monitor for chemical leaks in the facility and did not prevent "fugitive VOC (volatile organic compounds) emissions." KMCO's parent company was ordered to pay a \$3.5 million fine for these violations.

Long before this year's explosions, the Houston area's petrochemical industry has been a well-known danger to workers and residents.

Last year an eruption caused by over-pressurized pipes at a Kuraray Eval plastic fabrication plant in Pasadena, Texas injured 22 workers. An Arkema chemical plant in Crosby, Texas erupted in 2017 after flooding from Hurricane Harvey knocked out the facility's refrigeration system. The flood waters also carried 23,000 pounds of toxic chemicals into

neighboring homes. A 2005 explosion at a BP refinery in Texas City, Texas killed fifteen workers and injured 180.

A Department of State Health Services study in 2015 revealed that residents of eastern Harris County and eastern Houston have a higher incidence of certain cancers compared to the general population. The study area, which includes Crosby and Deer Park, sees more cases of childhood lymphoma and melanoma than the national average. A higher rate of brain and cervical cancer for all ages was also established.



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