

Two workers killed in fire at North Carolina paper mill

Cordell Gascoigne
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Two contractors at the Evergreen Packaging paper mill located in Canton, North Carolina were killed Monday when a three-alarm fire broke out in a tank under repair in the processing wing of the facility. The fire reportedly started shortly after 5 a.m. EDT and was said to be under control around 8 a.m. EDT. A spokeswoman for the North Carolina Department of Commerce confirmed that the department's "Occupational Safety and Health Division is investigating."

According to the plant manager, Wally McDonald, at approximately 5:15 a.m. EDT on September 21, 2020, a fire occurred in a process vessel at the Canton Mill. This tank was being repaired as part of a maintenance outage within the mill. McDonald said the families of the victims have been notified, but the names of the workers have not yet been made public.

According Haywood County's Emergency Medical Services Department, the fire started in the Number 2 fiber line inside the tower. There was reportedly concern over a possible structural collapse. Fire units from across the region were mobilized to assist.

The plant began operations in 1908 and is located on 200 acres inside the town of Canton. It employs approximately 1,200 people, making the mill the largest industrial employer in Haywood County. Haywood County's population is approximately 64,000, with a growth rate of 1.49 percent, according to the most recent United States census data.

A contract employee at the Canton plant told WYFF News 4 that he arrived only moments after the fire erupted. "There [were] people evacuating, coming out," Cody Marquette said. "Nobody really knew what was going on. It was kind of chaotic." Marquette further elaborated, saying that the company was undergoing maintenance and cleaning on Monday.

"Usually, this is when everyone gets their overtime and we'll work a lot. Everyone does repairs and whatever needs to be done to keep the plant going."

This is not the first time the Evergreen Packaging plant has experienced workplace injuries and attracted the attention of the state's Occupational Safety and Health Division. (NCOSH)

In 2002, Blue Ridge Paper Products, the company's name up until 2010 when it came under the ownership of New Zealand-based Reynolds Group Holdings Limited, received 33 initial violations, later reduced to 30. The infractions ranged from employees being struck by falling objects to falls due to lack of preventative measures. On August 23, 2012, NCOSH reported an incident at the plant. The report stated, "Employee #1 was standing in the basement under #19 paper machine installing new rope on the dryer cans when a dryer can cover (manhole cover) weighing approximately 35 lbs. fell approximately 20 feet and struck the employee on his head." The overwhelming majority of the 2002 violations ranked "serious."

According to the North Carolina Department of Labor, the state had 59 workplace fatalities in the 2020 fiscal year, which ran from October 2019 to August 2020. Of those workplace deaths, 23 were in construction and 11 in manufacturing. The Asheville District office is located only 20 miles from Canton and covers the western half of the state. It recorded 5 fatalities during that time period. The *Occupational Fatality Inspection Review* listed 54 fatalities for the state in 2019, with 18 deaths in construction and nine in manufacturing. 2018 totaled 49 fatalities, with 24 in construction and seven in manufacturing.

Underscoring management's commitment to profits over health and safety the company has maintained production at its facilities in the midst of the global

pandemic. Coronavirus cases in the state of North Carolina stand at over 195,000, with 3,282 deaths. Haywood County has reported a total of 580 cases and 31 deaths.

On its website, Evergreen Packaging speaks of a “transparency commitment around the COVID-19 pandemic.” It says “Evergreen reports positive COVID-19 cases among employees in its facilities.” According to their website, Canton and Waynesville facilities, both located in Haywood County, had eight confirmed cases on August 16.

Evergreen Packaging has conversion facilities and mills spanning the globe, with a presence in countries such as Korea, Taiwan and the United Arab Emirates. A mill located in Pine Bluff, Arkansas had reported 63 COVID cases just under two weeks ago, its most recent report to date. The website had reported five cases at Evergreen’s Athens, Georgia plant on September 3 and on August 26, 10 cases at its Plant City, Florida facility.

The city of Pine Bluff currently reports 2,928 coronavirus cases and 63 deaths. Athens reports 4,890 cases and 41 deaths, and Hillsborough County, where Plant City is located, reports 41,016 cases and 605 deaths.

North Carolina Democratic Governor Roy Cooper implemented “Phase 2.5” of his COVID-19 reopening plan September 4. Adopting the murderous pseudo-scientific policy of “herd immunity” in a bipartisan campaign to force students and educators into schools and workers back onto jobsites, all in the midst of the deadliest wave of COVID-19, these loosened restrictions will exacerbate the rate at which workers, students, and educators get infected and die.

Cooper’s reopening plan now permits museums and aquariums to reopen at 50 percent capacity and gyms at 30 percent. Fifty percent capacity restrictions for restaurants remain in effect. The plan increases the number allowed at gatherings to 25 people indoors and 50 people outdoors from the current limit of 10 indoors and 25 outdoors. The easing of restriction comes despite the disastrous reopening of the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill that saw 130 new cases in just the first week of classes.

“Moving forward doesn’t mean letting up,” said Dr. Mandy Cohen, head of the state Department of Health and Human Services. Cohen said fewer people in the state are getting tested, reminding people they “should

get a coronavirus test if they feel sick or were exposed to someone who tested positive.”

At the time “Phase 2.5” was going into effect, 170,000 people had tested positive for the coronavirus. As of this writing, nearly 196,000 are infected in North Carolina, amounting to a daily infection rate of 1,529 people.



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