Nitrogen leak kills six at Gainesville, Georgia poultry plant

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A nitrogen leak Thursday morning at the Foundation Foods plant in Gainesville, Georgia led to the deaths of six workers, five on site and one later in the emergency room. Several others were taken to the hospital for treatment, according to press reports.

Zach Brackett, Hall County Fire Department Division Chief, reported that firefighters had responded to the leak just after 10:00 a.m. “Once the units arrived, they found a large contingent of employees that had evacuated, along with multiple victims that were in that crowd that were also experiencing medical emergencies around the facility,” he told reporters.

Local firefighters, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the State Fire Marshal were investigating the cause of the leak, the Hall County fire chief said. “It was a leak of unknown cause that has occurred in the system here,” Brackett said. “We still have a lot of information we’re trying to gather from the scene.”

Nearly 130 workers were taken by bus to a nearby church where examinations for injuries were conducted. At least four firefighters were injured by the vaporized nitrogen. They were taken to the hospital for “respiratory complaints,” according to Brackett.

Sean Couch, a spokesperson for Northeast Georgia Health System, said that of the nine additional injured patients at the hospital, three remain in critical condition, five were being treated in the emergency room and were in fair condition, and one was being sent to the emergency room.

Local authorities implemented a shelter-in-place order for the surrounding area, including at a nearby elementary school. However, the order was later lifted when the toxic gas was determined not to have left the facility.

In September, the Foundation Foods Group acquired two Gainesville-based poultry companies—Prime Pak Foods and Victory Processing—and merged them, adding four plants with 1,200 workers, registering annual revenues of $200 million. The plant where the fatal gas leak occurred, previously run by Prime Pak, had a record of serious safety violations.

According to the OSHA, the Prime Pak plant had been the subject of four cases opened by state and federal investigators and cited for 15 violations over the past five years. This includes a 2017 incident in which a worker had two fingers partially amputated while clearing a jam from a cuber machine. The company was fined $12,548 for the incident.

Describing the conditions at the Prime Pak plant last year, a forklift operator posted a review on the website Indeed.com, saying, “They expect you to do everyone else’s job, but you barely get paid to do your own. And they cut overtime. Half of the time management didn’t know their butt from a hole in the ground. Half of the time they were looking for shipping to solve the problem, and last time I checked we don’t get paid enough.”

It is not known if cost-cutting or manpower shortages contributed to the deadly accident. The Foundation Foods Facebook page currently has hiring ads for workers, including maintenance and refrigeration techs. There are also ads for full-time and part-time workers, offering a “training wage” of $12 an hour for 10- to 12-hour shifts.

Poultry plants are reliant upon refrigeration systems that may include liquid nitrogen and other potentially toxic substances. Last October, a manager at the Texas Packing Company pleaded guilty to misleading federal regulators in 2018, over the storage of an illegal quantity of anhydrous ammonia, a refrigerant, exposing workers to the hazardous chemical.

Exposure to the refrigerant may cause convulsive coughing, painful breathing, pulmonary congestion, blindness or even death. According to OSHA’s website, “Refrigerant grade anhydrous ammonia is a clear, colorless liquid or gas, free from visible impurities.”

Unlike anhydrous ammonia, gaseous nitrogen is odorless under normal conditions. While nitrogen, which makes up 78 percent of the Earth’s atmosphere, is inert and noncombustible, exposure to concentrated levels of the gas can cause asphyxiation. Given the fairly common use of nitrogen in industrial settings, deaths due to nitrogen leaks are not uncommon. Between 1992-2002, 80 workplace deaths and 50 injuries were caused by asphyxiation from nitrogen leaks, according to the federal Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB).

Inhalation of nitrogen gas in excessive amounts gives only a few seconds’ warning—dizziness, nausea, and vomiting but may also lead to loss of consciousness and death within seconds.

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Oxygen concentrations below 19 percent cause almost immediate impairment, according to the CSB. This poses extreme hazards not only to those who are initially exposed but to rescuers as well.

In 2005, a nitrogen leak led to the deaths of two contractors at Valero Energy Corporation"s Delaware City, Delaware oil refinery. The workers were working in a confined space when they were exposed to deadly concentrations of nitrogen.

Gainesville, 50 miles northeast of Atlanta, bills itself as the "Poultry Capital of the World." It is the center of Georgia's poultry industry, which in turn produces more chicken than any other state. Hall County, the county in north central Georgia where Gainesville is located, has a population of 204,000. There are more than a dozen meat-processing plants in Hall County and several others in surrounding counties.

Hall County is also home to one of the most concentrated COVID-19 outbreaks in the state. According to statistics compiled by the state government, it has had over 22,300 infections, more than one-tenth of the county's population, and 306 deaths. The testing positivity rate in the county is an astronomical 16.5 percent, almost double the national average, suggesting that the official figures are significant undercounts of the real total. With 862,000 cases and 13,222 deaths, the state of Georgia is rapidly approaching one million cases.

This is the result of continuation of production, the lack of social distancing and adequate PPE in the meatpacking industry, which have served as the key drivers of infections in rural and semirural communities. According to the Food and Environment Reporting Network, at least 56,300 meatpacking workers have been infected nationwide and 277 have died.

This trend is particularly pronounced in Georgia, where less populous counties with large concentrations of meatpacking plants, rather than major cities such as Atlanta, were the main centers of the disease in the early part of last year. A study by *Facing South*, published in September, found that Hall County and other counties with large meatpacking workforces had, on average, 30 percent higher infection rates than other rural counties in the state. In the early part of the pandemic, these counties had 55 percent more infections than other rural counties.

A major element in the continuation of production in meatpacking was the invocation of the Defense Production Act by former US President Donald Trump on April 28 to keep the industry open, effectively preventing state and local officials from intervening to contain outbreaks. The action was taken after a series of wildcat strikes and protests by workers against the deadly conditions. OSHA also moved to reinterpret regulations to effectively shield corporations from any liability for workplace-related COVID deaths.

Throughout the entire pandemic, OSHA has issued only 310 citations for COVID-related violations and eight in the entire state of Georgia. The agency has issued slightly more than $4 million in total fines, or less than $13,000 per citation.

Another critical factor in the ability of the meatpacking companies to maintain production has been their collusion with the unions, including the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union, to cover up infections and pressure workers to remain on the job. The UFCW did nothing to oppose, or even alert the public, about major outbreaks at plants such as Tyson's Waterloo pork plant in Iowa and Rochelle Foods in Illinois. In Waterloo, the union even collaborated with the company to implement incentive bonuses for perfect attendance, while management covered up hundreds of infections and took bets on how many workers would get sick.

The policy of forcing workplaces to remain open retains broad bipartisan support. The Biden administration, which has not revoked Trump's order, has rejected calls for a national lockdown, instead directing OSHA to enact minimum guidelines, such as requiring workers to wear masks. Biden has also declared the reopening of all the country's schools by April as one of his top priorities in order to allow parents to return to work.

Even before the pandemic, one worker died every 99 minutes from a work-related injury, according to a report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics released last month. There were 5,333 fatal workplace injuries recorded in the US in 2019, a two percent increase over the 2018 count of 5,250. This was the largest fatal case count since 2007.

The rush to maintain and ramp up production, cut costs to boost profits and shareholder returns, along with the expanded use of temps and less experienced workers to replace more experienced workers, who are sick or caring for their children during the pandemic, can only lead to more tragedies like the one that occurred in Gainesville on Thursday.

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