

Aftermath of Chemtool fire puts Rockton, Illinois residents at risk

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On June 14, at around 7 am, a massive explosion occurred at the Chemtool plant in Rockton, Illinois. A raging fire and large plumes of black smoke forced the evacuation of the plant's workers and all residents within a one-mile radius.

Firefighters from all around the area, including Wisconsin, responded to the blaze, which could be seen for miles. Soon, however, Rockton Fire Chief Kirk Wilson told responders to stop using hoses and water to put out the fire and instead allow it to "burn off," because of possible runoff contamination of the Rock River, approximately 700 feet from the plant. The river is a major resource for Rockton's residents.

It took until June 25, over a week after the initial explosion, for the fire to finally go out. Testing is still being done to confirm that there are no harmful pollutants for residents in the air or water as a result of the explosion and fire. While air quality tests have shown there to be no lethal amounts of chemicals in the air, tests of the water remain inconclusive. It will take up to six weeks for the results to be finalized.

The plant itself has almost entirely burned to the ground, with virtually nothing salvageable as far as manufacturing equipment and building structures go.

All workers onsite at the time of the explosion were evacuated safely and no casualties or grave injuries occurred from the fire. The blaze has been ruled accidental. The cause is attributed to a scissor lift in the plant striking a valve or pipe with sufficient force to cause the release of flammable mineral oil.

According to Fire Chief Wilson, however, "the investigation has not yet determined the source of the ignition." This implies that there remain significant questions as to how the fire actually started and why it got out of hand so quickly.

Chemtool's parent company is Lubrizol, a

multinational corporation with billions of dollars in revenue that specializes in the production of chemicals. It has been given an exceptional degree of latitude in its response.

On the morning of the explosion, Lubrizol called in a private firefighting company, US Fire Pump, to assist local responders. The outside contractor used a foam chemical to try and put out the fire, one that fell under the PFAS class of chemicals. These have been nicknamed "forever chemicals" and are believed to remain in the environment as well as in wildlife and human beings for extended periods of time. The use of this chemical forced the authorities to carry out immediate water quality tests to make sure the Rock River was not contaminated.

On June 19, five days after the explosion and while the fire was still burning, Wilson handed over command of the disaster response to Lubrizol and its own fire chief, Robert Campise. Announcing this change, Wilson declared, "With any industrial fire incident, this is their forte," a clear allusion to another massive fire at a Lubrizol plant, this one in Rouen, France in 2019. That fire left multiple people with headaches, dizziness and nausea, and caused eight hospitalizations due to the release of toxic chemical pollutants. Lubrizol has denied that any lethal or harmful chemicals were discharged into the general public, and the cause of the fire remains unknown.

Lubrizol's contractor has already dug massive trenches around the plant and surrounding area to try and channel runoff away from Rock River. There is also a large floating barrier separating some 2,500 feet of shoreline from the river and a substantial containment shoulder around the plant itself. These measures have been put in place because many large containers holding oil and other chemicals are showing

signs of severe structural damage. There are over one million gallons of oil stored at the site.

These steps are being taken by Lubrizol without answering to any authority, whether it be the Rockton Fire Department, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, or the federal EPA. Rockton Village President John Peterson has petitioned Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker to declare Rockton a disaster area and allocate more funding for cleanup efforts, although Pritzker, a Democrat, has to date given no response.

The Facebook group “Citizens for Chemtool Accountability” has been instrumental in arranging town halls for residents to speak to local officials and Chemtool representatives about the damage the fire has done to the surrounding area.

Community scientist and group member Jillian Neece has given townspeople important information regarding EPA findings on air and water quality since the explosion, as this data remains largely unknown to Rockton’s residents. The group also started a GoFundMe for Brent Loomis, a veteran who fled his house with the windows open during the hurried evacuation. The fire left his entire home covered in black film and harmful smoke, making his residence unlivable. According to MyStateline.com, Chemtool’s suggestion for Loomis was to hire a cleaning company and send Chemtool the bill.

Corporations like Lubrizol have no vested interest in the health or safety of Rockton’s citizens. As evidenced in the aftermath of the Rouen disaster, Lubrizol’s push to take over recovery efforts in Rockton serve only its corporate and profit interests.



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