Two workers at Fayetteville, North Carolina Valley Proteins plant found dead, investigation underway

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This past Sunday, two employees were found unresponsive at the Valley Proteins plant in Fayetteville, North Carolina. According to officials, the incident occurred in a pit around 1:30 p.m. EDT. Two co-workers reported the incident; a Hazardous Materials (HAZMAT) team responded, and the building was evacuated. A statement by deputies released soon after the incident reported that the workers had succumbed to their injuries.

The Fayetteville Fire Department's HAZMAT team and the Pearce's Mill Volunteer Fire Department evacuated the building. A state Occupational and Safety Health Administration (OSHA) Emergency Response Team was also at the scene.

"When you first hear about it, your thoughts go to the workers and their families—especially the families and everything they lost with this," said attorney Matt Healey. Healey, who specializes in workers' compensation, said OSHA standards require companies to provide safe workspaces. "Your employer must keep your workplace free of known health and safety hazards," he declared.

Healey went on to explain, "There are specific guidelines for confined spaces in terms of whether you can even go in it or not. If you do, protections have to be there."

However, the company was quick to counter, attempting to shift blame for the tragedy onto the victims themselves. "This accident may have occurred by lack of following company safety procedures, which both employees have been trained in. We are in the process of a full investigation, working with all agencies involved to find out what exactly occurred."

Valley Proteins' headquarters are located in Winchester, Virginia and the company has more than 30 facilities in the Southern and Eastern United States. According to the company's website, "Valley Proteins, Inc. provides services for the collection, rendering and recycling of animal processing and supermarket waste streams (fat and bone trimmings; meat/poultry waste) and restaurant used cooking oil (UCO) throughout the contiguous United States."

As of September 6, the company had an annual revenue of more than $500 million with a 1,000-strong workforce, according to IncFact.com. On a weekly basis, general workers at the plant are paid an average of $548, production associates receive $694, plant supervisors get $1,040, and truck drivers around $1,130, according to Indeed.com.

Workers at the company described their experiences online, revealing the dangerous and brutal working conditions they face in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

On August 31, a former employee at the Fayetteville location said, "I started in raw material and dispatchers[.] Supervisors d[o] not care about you or your family. If you had time left on your clock to drive, you were expected to go. A lot of loads you were told to get; you were stuck waiting for an hour or more and getting paid 12 an hour to wait. Route driver role was awesome. Given paperwork at the start of your shift, finish the stops on that paperwork, and you were done. All paid 19 an hour. Supervisors were great on this role, off weekends and holidays, unlike the raw material side. ***Health benefits were unaffordable***."

Another former employee, at the Mifflintown plant in Pennsylvania, wrote on August 18, "Have to work long hours[,] 7 days a [week] to make money[.] You only

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get 10 hours off and right back out[.] You may work 14-hour day[s], take 10 off and work another 10."

Another former employee, this time from Ward, South Carolina, on September 13 wrote, "Ok[ay] place. Horrid management. Pay is low for work being done. Horrible conditions to work in. No parts, no proper tools. Hard work for little pay and no advancement unless you kno[w] someone."

In an interview with WRAL News, an anonymous employee stressed that the conditions in the plant expose workers to hazards, saying the two workers were likely exposed to hydrogen sulfide (H2S).

"Every single employee has an H2S monitor that will start beeping if it detects H2S in the air, and the faster it beeps, the higher the content," explained the Valley Proteins employee.

The anonymous worker knew something was wrong that Sunday afternoon when an employee tried to radio in and failed to receive a response. "They were discovered by two production employees, who happened to be walking by the area and found them face down, unresponsive," he said.

According to the OSHA website, the gas is not only toxic, but also flammable. "Hydrogen sulfide (also known as H2S, sewer gas, swamp gas, stink damp, and sour damp) is a colorless gas known for its pungent 'rotten egg' odor at low concentrations. It is extremely flammable and highly toxic."

Moreover, OSHA notes its indicators and where it often accumulates, "Hydrogen sulfide also occurs naturally in sewers, manure pits, well water, oil and gas wells, and volcanoes. Because it is heavier than air, hydrogen sulfide can collect in low-lying and enclosed spaces, such as manholes, sewers, and underground telephone vaults. Its presence makes work in confined spaces potentially very dangerous."

A specialist in confined-space rescues told WRAL News that the three primary causes of fatalities at plants similar to these are "low levels of oxygen, chemical exposures, and engulfment hazards." Valley Proteins has had myriad health violations at its North Carolina Valley Proteins facilities; however, this is the first at the Fayetteville location.

In 2010, at the Wadesboro facility, OSHA inspectors found combustible dust and exposures to chromium dust, initially assessing the company $30,500 in penalties before lowering the amount to $16,575. In 2015, the Accomac, Virginia location was initially charged $44,100 for myriad health and safety violations, but the assessment was later dropped to $10,120. And in 2020, the company was fined $14,000 at the Rose Hill plant in North Carolina, again for combustible dust.

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