Chemical spill kills five after tanker truck crash in southern Illinois

Brian Green, Benjamin Mateus
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On Friday night, a tanker truck carrying thousands of gallons of anhydrous ammonia crashed and spilled its contents while traveling on US Highway 40 in Effingham County, half a mile east of Teutopolis, in southern Illinois. The multi-vehicle accident resulted in five fatalities and several people were airlifted to a nearby hospital to be treated. All the deaths were due to chemical exposure, not trauma from the collision.

Around 500 residents in an approximate one-mile radius were immediately evacuated.

According to media reports, traffic had been rerouted through the small township of 2,800 people because of an earlier accident on Interstate 70. An Illinois State Police investigation determined that the tanker, owned by Prairie Land Transport Limited of Brownstown, was traveling westbound on Highway 40 before nine in the evening when another vehicle tried to pass it on the congested road. The truckdriver swerved to the right off the road, causing his rig to jackknife. The truck body hit the trailer hitch of another vehicle, leaving a gaping six-inch hole in the container.

According to Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officials, 4,000 of approximately 7,500 gallons of the highly caustic anhydrous ammonia spilled into the surrounding area. Many who witnessed the accident reported seeing a plume of toxic gas spilling out of the container.

The Effingham County coroner has confirmed that five people died from anhydrous ammonia exposure at the scene. Among the dead were Kenneth Bryan, 34, of Teutopolis and his two children, Rosie, 7, and Walker, 10. The other two victims were Danny J. Smith, 67, from Missouri, and Vasile Cricovan, 31, from Ohio.

Although earlier reports had not yet attributed the cause of death, those at the scene say a cloud of ammonia immediately swept over them and killing them. In a press release October 1, Coroner Kim Rhodes said preliminary investigation indicates all five victims died from anhydrous ammonia exposure.

Due to windy conditions, the toxic plume began to spread rapidly across the town. Effingham County officials issued an immediate evacuation order to parts of Teutopolis within an approximate one-mile radius downwind of the crash.

Fire Chief Tim McMahon told the local media that his firefighters realized they were dealing with severely toxic chemicals and had to retreat or become overwhelmed by the noxious gas. “We had to back out immediately, as well as some of the cars on Route 40,” McMahon said. “They were all feeling the effects of it.” The firefighters subsequently went house to house to assist people in evacuating.

The evacuation order was in effect into Saturday night, when Effingham County authorities informed residents it was safe to return to their homes as “testing has indicated that the danger from the anhydrous ammonia has dissipated,” said Teutopolis Assistant Fire Chief Joe Holomy.

Victims and their loved ones shared their stories on GoFundMe pages asking for assistance with funeral expenses. Miranda Kincaid, a Bryan family member, wrote, “Kenny, Walker, and Rosie were tragically taken from us as a result of the accident that affected the whole Teutopolis community. The whole family and I much appreciate anything, even just prayers during this time.” The appeal for funds also notes that these will assist the mother and remaining two children “with any other needs in the wake of their loss.”

Vasile Cricovan’s family shared his tragic last moments: “A truck carrying anhydrous ammonium overturned in front of him, he braked and got out of his truck and inhaled toxic vapors, after which he had a

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respiratory failure.”

The family of Anja Dangelmaier, among those exposed to the chemical at the scene, reported, “Anja and three teammates were behind a tanker truck when the tanker lost control and overturned. Anja and two teammates were airlifted to different hospitals, while one went by ambulance. All have similar chemical burn symptoms in varying degrees—lungs, eyes, and various body parts.”

Jordan and Megan Elmore of Teutopolis are unsure of their future as “4,000 gallons of anhydrous was released on their lawn,” according to one account, which added that the couple lost pets and livestock to the spill and “They are unsure if or when they will be able to return home.”

Anhydrous ammonia is a colorless, non-flammable, liquefied gas. It is used in multiple applications for industrial and agricultural purposes. Farmers use anhydrous ammonia to add nitrogen fertilizer to the soil, and it is used as a refrigerant in the cooling systems of buildings. According to the American Chemical Society, pipelines, trucks and trains carry it around the United States.

Ammonia can have serious health consequences from acute exposure through ingestion, inhalation or direct contact with skin or eyes, which can be deadly. It can cause severe irritations of the respiratory tract, burning and blistering to the skin and other organs in high concentrations, blindness, nausea and vomiting, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The tanker truck has since been removed and the incident has officially been declared over, although the affected families and the tight-knit community of working class residents will face consequences of the tragedy for years if not their entire lifetime. “Why do these things keep happening to us?” they will ask. But any answers they will get from the National Transportation Safety Board next month will surely not suffice.

What are the regulatory standards by which companies can transport these chemicals, and by what quantities and where? The Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate has raised questions in an article titled “Securing Transportation of Ammonia—Agricultural Lifeline and Future Affordable, Clean Energy Source.” This article flatly states that “growing demand means that larger volumes of ammonia will be transported across the country, increasing chemical threats.”

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