

Massive blaze burns at chemical plant north of Houston

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Last Wednesday, November 8, a massive fire at a chemical plant in Shepherd, Texas, approximately 60 miles northeast of Houston, forced officials to close down a local highway and order residents to take shelter for several hours.

According to the police, the fire, which expelled thick clouds of black smoke into the sky, was started by an explosion at Sound Resource Solutions. A large plume of smoke from the facility could be seen in videos captured by residents.

San Jacinto County Sheriff Greg Capers said that officials began receiving calls shortly after 8:00 a.m. about an explosion at the company's facility. Capers said a preliminary investigation found that the explosion occurred when an employee tried to move a container that was leaking chemicals. The container ignited when the worker attempted to use a forklift to move it.

Capers said one employee suffered minor burns to his body and was taken to a hospital, where he remains in stable condition. The sheriff added that initial reports indicated the chemicals involved were flammable liquids, including possibly diesel and turpentine.

There has been no further official clarification of the chemicals involved. However, records say the plant was housing a number of chemicals at the time of the fire, such as wood turpentine, phosphoric acid, xylene, diesel fuel, IMP-IC-2012, sulfuric acid, CDS-121, NP 9, isopropyl alcohol, IMB-BAC-2, .AZA-121, dispersants and acetic acid.

The solvents produced in the factory are used to make glue and paint remover, the Polk County Office of Emergency Management said in a statement. The agency warned that chemicals from the plant are toxic and can cause eye and skin irritation. In extreme cases, the chemicals can cause skin corrosion, choking and

organ toxicity.

Shortly after the fire at the plant, authorities asked residents within a one-mile radius of Sound Resource Solutions, as well as those in surrounding communities, to shelter in place for five hours. Residents were also told to shut off their HVAC air conditioning systems. At one point, the Polk County Sheriff's Office warned in a Facebook post that the smoke might have headed toward the nearby city of Livingston.

According to San Jacinto County Emergency Management Coordinator Emmitt Eldridge, the blaze was contained by Wednesday afternoon after fire fighters worked, using two ladder trucks, to put it out with foam. Agency spokesperson Ryan Vise said the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality would continue to monitor the air through Wednesday evening and would begin working with the chemical plant's owner on cleaning up the site.

According to data compiled by the Coalition to Prevent Chemical Disasters, a group of environmental justice organizations, a chemical fire, explosion or toxic release occurs every other day in the United States. At least 27 chemical incidents have occurred in Texas so far this year, the most of any state. Chemical incidents often have a severe impact on the health of people living and working nearby.

Moreover, the US Government Accountability Office reports that about a third of facilities which store hazardous chemicals are located in areas that are susceptible to natural hazards, made worse by climate change, such as wildfires and storm surges.

Following the 2019 chemical fire at Intercontinental Terminals Company's Deer Park facility, the *Texas Tribune* conducted an investigation, which revealed that hundreds of residents experienced symptoms of benzene exposure, including dizziness, rapid heart rates

and headaches, and that dangerous levels of benzene, a known carcinogen, remained in the air for weeks after the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality declared it to be safe.



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