Ammonia leak spreads gas cloud in Weatherford, Oklahoma, sends 34 to the hospital

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A chemical disaster unfolded in Weatherford, Oklahoma on Thursday when a tanker truck carrying 25,000 pounds of anhydrous ammonia began leaking its contents behind a Holiday Inn Express.

The incident precipitated a mass emergency response, with dozens suffering severe health injuries. The chemical leak forced the evacuation of over 500 area residents as authorities scrambled to contain and investigate the deadly vapor cloud.

Photos and videos were posted online showing a thick plume of the chemical that had engulfed the parking lot of the Holiday Inn Express.

The tanker truck is owned by Airgas Specialty Products based in Lawrenceville, Georgia. The anhydrous ammonia onboard also belonged to Airgas, a major supplier and distributor of industrial gases in the region. Airgas confirmed its involvement and stated that its crews have been on-site, coordinating with authorities on environmental monitoring and cleanup efforts.

The Airgas Specialty Products tanker truck originated from a regional chemical facility in the central or western Oklahoma area. The truck was in transit when the driver parked at the Holiday Inn Express overnight.

The destination of the ammonia shipment, although unknown, was likely a local agricultural operations company or distributor in central Oklahoma. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and local officials confirmed the truck was actively delivering fertilizer at the time of the accident.

Local authorities report that Weatherford Police and fire personnel first received 911 calls around 10:00 p.m. from the semi-truck's driver, who discovered the ammonia leak in the parking lot behind the hotel.

Mechanical failure in a gasket or valve is believed to have leaked the ammonia in large quantities, forming the toxic cloud that blanketed both the Holiday Inn and adjacent residential blocks. Residents within the evacuation zone east of Washington Street and north of Main Street were woken by first responders going door to door or by shelter-in-place alerts sent to their phones.

Public schools and businesses within the affected radius—including Southwestern Oklahoma State University—were ordered closed as firefighters and hazardous material crews worked through the night to dilute the gas and monitor air quality.

More than 500 residents were evacuated to emergency shelters as officials established incident command posts and used approximately 2.4 million gallons of water to suppress vapors and flush out the contamination. Federal agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) were involved in the response and are reportedly conducting an investigation. No details or preliminary findings of the investigation were available at the time of this writing.

Victims described scenes of confusion and terror inside the Holiday Inn as ammonia fumes rapidly filled the hallways. "It started out with tightness of chest, hard to breathe, a little bit of burning, nothing too chaotic and then much worse," a hotel guest told local television.

Other guests, catching the ammonia's suffocating odor, pounded on doors to wake sleeping occupants. "We started choking and everyone rushed outside, but the gas was everywhere," one evacuee recounted in a KFOR interview.

City police chief Angelo Orefice confirmed to the press that the evacuation was carried out through a mix of door-knocking and urgent phone alerts. Emergency crews, braving exposure, helped people with mobility issues escape the immediate area. "Six of my officers have chemical burns in their throats from exposure to the gas

and are off duty, but they should be fine in a couple of days," Orefice stated at a subsequent news briefing.

The human toll of the exposure was widespread. Thirty-four individuals were treated for serious injuries at Weatherford Regional Hospital, with eleven in critical condition and five airlifted to trauma centers in Oklahoma City.

Dozens more suffered respiratory distress, burns, or loss of consciousness, including first responders. Hundreds remain displaced as the cleanup continues.

Anhydrous ammonia is highly effective as a fertilizer that helps farmers grow food and replenish nutrients in the soil. As a fertilizer, it provides essential nitrogen for plants, and industry experts report that it must be handled with a high level of safety awareness and care.

Ammonia gas is both corrosive and highly irritating to all exposed tissue. Inhalation typically causes immediate coughing, throat and chest pain, respiratory distress, and burning of the eyes and airways. Substantial exposure—like that which occurred in Weatherford—can result in chemical burns, laryngeal swelling, pulmonary edema, and risk of death from airway obstruction or lung injury.

Victims often require urgent decontamination by removing clothing, extensive washing, and supportive care in ventilated hospital wards. Skin or ocular contact with ammonia can cause deep burns, severe irritation, and potentially permanent vision loss.

For those with preexisting respiratory conditions such as asthma, even lower concentrations of ammonia can induce life-threatening exacerbation and long-term lung damage. In some cases, repeated workplace exposures have led to chronic cough, lung fibrosis, and "reactive airways dysfunction syndrome."

The Weatherford incident is the latest in a troubling history of anhydrous ammonia leaks associated with transport and industrial disasters in the United States. Among the major events is the 2004 pipeline rupture near Kingman, Kansas, which released over 200,000 gallons of ammonia, killing more than 25,000 fish and forcing mass evacuation.

In other cases, failure to quickly notify the public or take proper precautions contributed to widespread environmental and health damage. Between 1,500 and 2,000 chemical transport accidents involving hazardous materials like ammonia occur each year, with the Department of Transportation estimating that many stem from inadequate packaging, labeling, or employee training.

Oversight of ammonia and other chemical transportation lies primarily with the Department of Transportation (DOT) and its Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA). PHMSA develops safety regulations covering the classification, handling, packaging, and emergency response protocols for all hazardous chemicals moved by road, rail, and pipeline.

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) also plays a role by enforcing standards for drivers and vehicle safety. The EPA assists during active emergencies by monitoring contamination and coordinating cleanup efforts, as occurred in Oklahoma.

For years, the *World Socialist Web Site* has warned about the catastrophic consequences of undermining the US chemical safety infrastructure, especially the Trump administration's attack on any government oversight of corporate practices and the removal of any restrictions that reduce profitability.

In a recent article, the WSWS reported, "Closing the Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB) will mean more accidents at chemical plants, more explosions and more deaths." The CSB is the only federal agency mandated to conduct root cause investigations after chemical accidents and to make recommendations for system-wide safety improvements, recommendations routinely ignored or weakened by industry lobbying.

The Trump administration's campaign to defund and eliminate the CSB, replacing its $14.4 million annual budget with nothing, has drawn condemnation from public health experts and chemical safety advocates alike. Former CSB board member Beth Rosenberg told the WSWS: "All the accidents the CSB examined were preventable and using the most advanced science available it produces reports showing why."