

Two killed, dozens injured in West Virginia chemical plant explosion

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A deadly incident at a chemical facility in Institute, West Virginia left two workers dead and dozens of others injured on Wednesday, according to official reports. Several of those hurt required hospitalization, including emergency responders who were exposed while assisting at the scene.

Located less than 20 miles from Charleston, WV, the explosion occurred at a facility operated by Catalyst Refiners, located along the Kanawha River in an area long known for its concentration of chemical manufacturing.

Local authorities said the incident occurred while crews were carrying out shutdown and cleanup work at the plant. During that process, chemicals interacted in a way that generated a hazardous gas, believed to include hydrogen sulfide. First responders were dispatched to the site, and nearby residents were advised to remain indoors for a period while crews worked to stabilize conditions. Roads surrounding the facility were temporarily shut down as specialized teams secured the area.

Emergency crews responded quickly, and a temporary shelter-in-place order was issued for nearby communities as a precaution. Several roads were closed while hazardous materials teams worked to contain the scene.

At least 20 to 30 people, including plant workers and first responders, were evaluated or treated for symptoms such as difficulty breathing, coughing and eye irritation. Some victims were transported to nearby hospitals in Charleston, West Virginia, and officials said at least one person remained in critical condition as of late Wednesday.

As of late Wednesday, authorities have not released the identities of those killed.

State and federal agencies, including the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, have launched an investigation into the cause of the incident. The Kanawha Valley—sometimes referred to as “Chemical Valley”—has a long history of industrial accidents, including the 2014

Elk River chemical spill that disrupted water service for hundreds of thousands of residents.

The facility’s operations centered on extracting valuable metals—primarily silver—from industrial waste products. This type of processing typically involves breaking down materials such as electronics or photographic components through chemical treatment, allowing metals to be separated and recovered. The work often requires the use of corrosive substances that dissolve unwanted material, leaving behind concentrated metal compounds that can be refined and reused.

The plant’s history reflects the broader evolution—and decline—of heavy chemical operations in West Virginia’s Kanawha Valley. The facility, owned by Ames Goldsmith Corporation, operated for years as part of a regional network of chemical and materials-processing plants.

In 2015 the plant lost its license to operate. In 2018, it reopened under its current name. By 2026, the site was no longer in full production and was undergoing shutdown procedures—circumstances that officials say contributed to the conditions leading to the deadly chemical release.

The explosion and deaths at Catalyst Refiners is part of a growing toll of workers deaths involving industrial accidents, as companies ignore safety as they push for greater profits.

The tragic deaths at Catalyst Refiners is the latest in a series of recent mining related fatalities in West Virginia. On April 3, 2026, 53-year-old Aaron Warrix was killed in Raleigh County after being struck by falling rock while working underground. Warrix, who worked as a shuttle car operator, had been employed at the Horse Creek Eagle Mine—identified in federal records as the Panther Eagle Mine—for several years.

Less than a day later, another fatal incident occurred at the Ohio County Mine in Marshall County. Darin Reece, a section supervisor overseeing continuous mining operations, died after becoming trapped between

equipment. Federal records show both mines had accumulated numerous safety violations in the months leading up to the accidents.

The U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB) has opened an investigation into the explosion at Catalyst Refiners. The CSB is an independent agency charged with determining the root causes of chemical incidents and issuing safety recommendations. Investigators typically deploy to the scene to collect physical evidence, review plant procedures and maintenance records, and interview workers, managers and emergency responders. However, the agency's findings often take months to complete and they have no authority to enforce their finding.

Furthermore, the CSB has faced years of underfunding tied to budget cuts and political pressure, particularly under the Trump administration, which has sought to close the agency down entirely. Safety advocates say those constraints have weakened the agency's ability to respond quickly and thoroughly to major incidents. Although the CSB continues to operate and investigate serious accidents, lack of sufficient staffing and funding undermines its ability keep pace with the volume and complexity of industrial hazards nationwide.

Data collected by the CSB and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration show that dozens of serious chemical incidents occur each year, ranging from fires and explosions to toxic releases. While many are contained with limited injuries, a number result in fatalities. Over the past few decades, major incidents have collectively killed hundreds of workers and community members, underscoring the inherent risks of handling volatile and toxic substances at industrial scale.

In 2013 a fire and explosion at the West Fertilizer Company killed 15 people, most of them first responders, and injured more than 250. In Deer Park, Texas, a 2019 fire at an Intercontinental Terminals Company storage facility burned for days and released hazardous chemicals into the air and nearby waterways, prompting widespread shelter-in-place orders. Such incidents illustrate how even a single failure—whether in storage, maintenance or emergency response—can escalate rapidly.

In 2023, a Norfolk Southern train derailed in East Palestine, Ohio and the decision by company and government officials to burn off five tanker cars filled with vinyl chloride spread poisonous chemicals over more than 20 miles from the accident, poisoning thousands of people.

While large explosions draw the most attention, a

quieter and more persistent concern is long-term exposure to low levels of industrial pollution among people living near chemical facilities. Research in environmental health has found that communities located close to refineries, petrochemical plants and waste-processing sites can face elevated exposure to substances such as benzene, formaldehyde and other known or suspected carcinogens.

Epidemiological studies have linked long-term exposure in these areas to higher rates of certain cancers, as well as respiratory illnesses, cardiovascular disease and adverse birth outcomes. In places like the heavily industrialized corridor along the Mississippi River known as Cancer Alley, residents and researchers have reported elevated rates of rare cancers and chronic health conditions. Similar concerns have been raised in parts of Houston, Texas and other industrial regions, where residential communities bordering industrial sites—often lower-income—experience disproportionately high exposure to airborne toxins over long periods.

Behind the growing number of industrial explosions and fatalities as well as the continuous poisoning of millions of people is the shortcutting of safety by corporations under relentless pressure by Wall Street to maximize profits.

At the same time, the Trump administration as well as politicians in both the Democrats and Republicans have cut safety regulatory agencies and worker protections in the name of eliminating so called government waste and red tape, sacrificing workers lives and health, for the sake of fattening corporate shareholders bank accounts.



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