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Blast at ethanol plant kills 1 ; Victim was 20-year-old welder; another worker was injured; [METRO Edition]

Richard Meryhew, Staff Writer. Star Tribune. Minneapolis, Minn.: Oct 23, 2003. pg. 1.B

Companies: Occupational Safety & Health Administration (NAICS: 926150)

Author(s): Richard Meryhew, Staff Writer

Dateline: *Benson, Minn.*

Section: *NEWS*

Publication title: Star Tribune. Minneapolis, Minn.: Oct 23, 2003. pg. 1.B

Source type: Newspaper

ISSN/ISBN: 08952825

ProQuest document ID: 429558931

Text Word Count 872

Document URL: <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=429558931&sid=13&Fmt=3&clientId=42362&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

Abstract (Document Summary)

Most of the plant's 45-million-gallon annual capacity is devoted to producing fuel-grade alcohol, or ethanol, from corn. It runs 24 hours a day, every day and is one of 14 ethanol plants in Minnesota.

[Ken Hanson] said [Robert Olson], who apparently was welding, was working in the corn-mash area at the time. Corn mash is not flammable, said James Honerman, an OSHA spokesman.

The [Benson] plant was cited for seven safety violations in 1998 that were deemed "serious" by OSHA. Detected on a scheduled visit by OSHA officials, the violations involved inadequate safety guards, as well as a failure to establish and train workers in some operating procedures.

Full Text (872 words)

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Ron Claussen had just parked a truckload of corn and was heading inside the Chippewa Valley Ethanol Co. on Wednesday morning when he heard a "whoosh," looked up and saw a huge metal cylinder shoot into the sky.

"It was just like putting a firecracker in a beer can," said the 48-year-old grain farmer, who lives near Benson. "It popped right up. Then I saw this gush of steam and sludge coming at me."

Claussen raced to a side entrance of a nearby building before it dawned on him what had happened - a corn processing tank 40 yards in front of him had exploded, setting fire to part of the plant and sending corn mash oozing across the grounds.

A 20-year-old welder was killed and another worker was injured when the large metal tank was thrown several hundred feet and landed on a tanker truck parked at a nearby loading dock, said Swift County Sheriff Ken Hanson.

The truck was destroyed in the blast and resulting fire.

Claussen escaped injury by racing back to his truck and driving off the grounds as firefighters arrived.

"I started thinking 'this is alcohol. If it ignites, I don't want to be here, ' " he said.

Firefighters from 11 west-central Minnesota communities put out the fire within an hour.

Hanson identified the dead man as Robert Olson of Granite Falls, Minn., who was working near the storage tank as an

independent contractor for Lundin Construction of Hanley Falls, Minn.

His body was found outside the plant, several hundred feet from his work site.

Injured was Troy Leonard of Benson, an employee of the ethanol plant. He was in fair condition Wednesday afternoon at the Swift County-Benson Hospital. He declined a request to be interviewed.

The company's 44 employees were sent home for the day, unsure of when they might be able to return.

"We've had a very tragic day today," said Bill Lee, general manager of the plant.

Gasohol and vodka

Most of the plant's 45-million-gallon annual capacity is devoted to producing fuel-grade alcohol, or ethanol, from corn. It runs 24 hours a day, every day and is one of 14 ethanol plants in Minnesota.

The plant blends some of its ethanol with gasoline to make a fuel called E85. It also produces Shakers vodka, which is advertised as the only ultrapremium vodka made in the United States.

It also is the only plant in Minnesota that makes industrial and food-grade alcohol for use in mouthwash, hair spray, vanilla and other extracts.

Lee declined to speculate on what might have caused the explosion, which could be heard for several miles.

"At this point, it's a little too early to say what happened," he said.

Investigators from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) and the state fire marshal's office were at the scene throughout the day sifting through debris and trying to figure out what went wrong.

Lee said most of the damage was confined to a small area of the plant on the north side. He wouldn't say how long the business would be closed, but said "it will not be an insurmountable job to repair this area and have the plant back operating" in the coming days.

Hanson said the explosion occurred about 8:15 a.m. in a part of the plant where corn mash is processed in the production of ethanol.

Craig Schafer, an emergency response specialist for the MPCA, said the tank "acted as a projectile," as it shot into the sky.

Hanson said Olson, who apparently was welding, was working in the corn-mash area at the time. Corn mash is not flammable, said James Honerman, an OSHA spokesman.

Benson Fire Chief Greg Lee said firefighters continued to spray water for several hours to cool nearby railroad tank cars and to keep other bins or tanks from igniting..

Schafer said about 40,000 gallons of corn mash spilled in the explosion, but "none of the material left the property."

The blast also fractured a pipe, releasing about 1,700 gallons of sulfuric acid, Schafer said. "It's all been contained," he said.

The Benson plant was cited for seven safety violations in 1998 that were deemed "serious" by OSHA. Detected on a scheduled visit by OSHA officials, the violations involved inadequate safety guards, as well as a failure to establish and train workers in some operating procedures.

Two of the latter violations were for lack of procedures in areas with flammable liquids.

Fines for serious violations generally run from \$1,500 to \$5,000, and can go as high as \$7,000. Chippewa Valley was fined only a total of \$3,500 for the seven violations, and the penalty was cut to \$1,750 under an agreement with OSHA.

Honerman said the agency has not received any safety complaints from workers at the Benson plant since then. He added that inspectors have not scheduled any return visits either because the ethanol industry is not considered highly hazardous.

"It was just really surreal seeing that happen," Claussen said later, reflecting on his close call.

Said his wife, Mary, "It's been kind of an upsetting day."

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Staff writer Bill McAuliffe contributed to this report; Richard Meryhew is at richm@startribune.com.

[Illustration]

Photo: MAP;PHOTO

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