



Midwest Grain explodes

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A Friday afternoon blast at Midwest Grain Products Inc., rocked the 1300 block of Main Street when its distillery facility exploded.

The eruption threw debris and glass with such force that it broke windows in the corporation's office building across the street and in a storage facility on the east side of 12th Street.

Steve Pickman, vice president of communications, said the explosion left four people injured--two employees and two contractors who had been working at the plant. One employee suffered burns and was taken by medical helicopter to the University of Kansas Medical Center as a precaution, he said. Another employee suffered minor eye lacerations from flying glass, one contractor sustained a broken hand and one a broken arm and injuries to his back.

"We're extremely thankful that there were no severe injuries," Mr. Pickman said. "We'll be praying and thanking the Lord that no one was killed."

Ladd Seaberg, president and CEO of Midwest Grain, said the damage to the facility will severely curtail production from the distillery for quite a while. However, the Midwest Grain plant in Pekin, Ill., will serve as backup for the company's customers.

The building was severely damaged and will affect a huge portion of the company's operation. The explosion ripped off the front of the building on Main Street and blew off both the roof and the back wall.

Plans call for meetings, Mr. Seaberg said, beginning today to assess the damage.

"We've got a great team of people to do that and we have good casualty and business interruption insurance," Mr. Seaberg said. "We'll be assessing how to be able to process the protein and take care of our customers' needs. It's the same thing with the modified starch. We are very blessed that we have a sister alcohol plant in Pekin."

Mr. Seaberg said he arrived at the scene within minutes after the blast. He said workers reacted quickly and evacuated employees from the buildings and nearby offices. By about 3 p.m. all employees were accounted for.

"We are very blessed and fortunate that no one was seriously hurt," he said.

Atchison Fire Chief Mike McDermed said he doesn't know what caused the explosion, but he thought an outside crew was cutting up some old tanks.

"Most of the fire is out," Chief McDermed said about 5:30 p.m. Friday. "Some of the big tanks are full of alcohol and we're not able to isolate them. There's no way to plug them up so we're going to have to let them burn out."

Chief McDermed said there are several tanks containing alcohol in the facility and the main alcohol storage tanks are located to the west of the building. Because of the extent of the fire he ordered train traffic halted between 10th and 14th streets.

"Until I'm satisfied that there's no danger to the public, the trains will not run," he said. "I had the main line shut

down."

At 3:35 p.m. firefighters learned that the foam they were using wasn't working and they needed to cap a plug to shut off the flow of alcohol. They were also monitoring anhydrous ammonia tanks across the street. At about 4:01 p.m. they reported the fire was still going and by 4:20 p.m. the Rushville Fire Department was on the scene for backup. Alcohol was still leaking and flames could be seen on the back side of the building. By 4:31 p.m. firefighters had entered the middle section and tried to shut off a valve line.

"We'll have to wait for the liquid to (burn down) and to burn itself out," Chief McDermed said. "It's burning between the cylinders and there's no valves to shut off near the tank."

Police Chief Mike Wilson said officers were on the scene immediately to secure a six square block area. Officers could be seen directing traffic and pedestrians away.

"That's an industrial plant and there was a heavy potential of another explosion," Chief Wilson said. "When we arrived there were flames showing; metal siding, broken glass and debris covered the street. When you see that damage, the first thing you think about is injuries."

By 8:02 p.m. trains could be heard running again and by 8:13 p.m. firefighters announced the fire was extinguished. But by 8:30 p.m. they announced they had spotted another flame.

Firefighters were expected to remain at the scene until all the tanks cooled and all hot spots were dissolved. Chief McDermed expected to be there well into the night. Chief Wilson said the area from 12th to 14th streets from Commercial to Main streets would be blocked off throughout the weekend to allow for cleanup efforts.

The community came out in full force after word spread of the explosion. Atchison County Sheriff John Calhoon said when he heard about the explosion, he came

immediately. He said in a time of catastrophe like the blast there's no doubt that the sheriff's department would help.

"It's just a time when you really value other people working in public service," he said of the firefighters. "I sat there and watched the firefighters work diligently and in dangerous conditions. I really admire what they do. If assistance is needed then the (sheriff's office) really go out for them."

Emergency medical technicians stood guard. Workers from Operations Management International opened up water lines to give firefighters enough water. The Salvation Army sent workers and its canteen with food and drinks. Several restaurants sent food including Pizza Hut that sent pizzas, Long John Silvers sent dinners and Quinn's Landing sent sandwiches, bottled water, candy, Gatorade and bags of ice.

"We wanted to help out any way we could," said Quinn Begley, general manager of Quinn's Landing. "Anybody that needed a snack--that needed something--we wanted them to have it. We wanted to help the firemen, police and anyone at Midwest."

In January 2001, a late-night explosion shook parts of Atchison when a machine used to manufacture starch exploded on 13th and Commercial streets. The blast was caused by a dust explosion from starch. The facility is used for bagging the company's wheat gluten and starch products. No one was hurt in that incident.