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Ethanol plant blast kills 1

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BENSON, Minn. — A tank holding 40,000 gallons of corn mash exploded with a "whoosh and a flash" at the Chippewa Valley Ethanol Co. plant Wednesday, killing a welder and injuring a plant worker in the worst accident in the history of Minnesota's ethanol industry.

The accident also prompted grave concerns in St. Paul, where Gopher State Ethanol runs the only urban ethanol plant in the nation.

The Benson blast "was a massive explosion and it's highly probable, from what we're hearing from people, that there were up to three explosions," said Steve Kellen, a deputy state fire marshal's office investigator.

The metal storage tank separated and part of it landed 75 feet away on a tanker truck, which was at the plant to get a load of ethanol fuel. The truck, with 2,000 gallons of fuel inside, burst into flames.

Meanwhile, the bottom portion of the tank barreled through the roof of an adjacent processing room. In that room, 1,700 gallons of sulfuric acid was released, though none of it escaped the room. Ten fire agencies joined the Benson Fire Department in fighting the fire, which was contained to the truck and was extinguished at about 10:15 a.m.

The explosion killed Robert Henry Olson, 20, of Granite Falls, Minn., a welder with Lundin Construction of Hanley Falls, said Swift County Sheriff Ken Hanson.

Troy Leonard, 21, of Benson, was hospitalized in fair condition at

Swift County-Benson Hospital with first- and second-degree burns. Leonard is an employee of the plant in Benson, about 130 miles west of the Twin Cities.

One official said it appeared Olson had been completing maintenance on top of the corn- mash tank that exploded. Corn mash is nonflammable.

Investigators worked throughout the day to determine what caused the blast.

"This has been just a tragic day," said Bill Lee, general manager of the Benson plant, where the U.S. flag outside had been set at half staff. "Our first priorities were to see that everyone was safe. Now we're still trying to find out what went wrong."

Most of the plant's workers were sent home for the day, Lee said. The accident was in a "pretty localized area," Lee said, and employees should be able to resume work in a week or two.

In St. Paul, 2nd Ward City Council Member Chris Coleman expressed concerns a similar tragedy could occur locally.

"Absolutely, this has been our concern every time we have to send firetrucks out there," said Coleman, who represents the area around the Gopher State plant.

He said he was making a formal request to St. Paul Fire Chief Doug Holton to conduct a safety review of the West Seventh Street facility, which opened in 2000 and has been a source of almost continual complaint by neighbors ever since.

The plant has added a thermal oxidizer to reduce the odors from the operation, and small fires have broken out in that section of the plant at least three times. Gopher State replaced the oxidizer and has reached three separate out-of-court settlements about the noise and pollution the plant emits.

Neighbors reacted with alarm to the news of the incident in Benson.

"It's scary," said Dori Ullman, who lives near the plant. "It's one of the things we've been worried about — what would happen if that thing really caught fire."

Initial reports suggest the Benson incident started in a part of the plant that turns corn into the watery mash that is later fermented to make the flammable ethyl alcohol — an essential step of the process at every ethanol plant.

Gopher State spokeswoman Lisa Nasseff said that because company officials don't know what caused the Benson explosion, they could not speak to whether there would be any similar dangers in St. Paul.

"Gopher State Ethanol has safety and emergency procedures in place to ensure the production of ethanol is safe for our employees, contractors and vendors and the surrounding neighborhood," she said.

The Benson plant has had a good track record, said Craig Schafer, emergency response specialist with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. There have been minor ethanol releases, but they have been "pretty typical," Schafer said.

In the last two weeks, the Chippewa Valley plant failed to report a small release of ethanol immediately afterward, as is required, and faces a citation, Schafer said.

"It was a fairly minor glitch, and it has no impact on what happened today," Schafer said. "They voluntarily took extra steps to remedy the problem."

The Chippewa Valley Ethanol Co. was built in 1996 and has 44 employees. Located outside town, it produces 42 million gallons of corn-derived fuel ethanol a year. It's the only one of the state's 14 ethanol plants that makes industrial and food-grade alcohol for use in vanilla, mouthwash, hairspray and other extracts.

The plant also blends ethanol with gasoline to make a fuel called E85.

And it produces the only ultra-premium wheat-derived vodka made in the United States, Shakers.

"When something new is coming to town, there's always some concerns," said Hanson, and the ethanol plant was no exception. But the concerns haven't been serious, he said.

In this farming and manufacturing town of about 3,500, the plant is a major employer, said Mayor Paul Kittelson.

"It looks like an isolated incident, but the review of what happened will tell us."

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