

NC Plant Workers To 911: 'ConAgra Just Blew Up'

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RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Emergency tapes released Monday show workers dialed 911 in a frenzy after escaping an explosion that killed three workers at a Slim Jim processing plant, with one panicked woman telling dispatchers: "ConAgra just blew up!"

The 15 audio tapes portray the early moments after the blast rocked the sprawling facility in Garner, a few miles south of Raleigh, where 300 people were working. Some callers tried to describe the situation as sirens blared and people screamed in the background, and responders struggled to understand the unfolding scene.

"ConAgra just blew up!" said one employee, referring to the plant's operator.

"What do you mean it blew up?" the dispatcher asked.

"It blew up! We need some help!" the woman responded.

Callers reported people bleeding profusely and suffering severe burns while they watched others escape the facility. The blast killed three workers and injured dozens of others. Four remain in critical condition with extensive burns.

"Oh my God. This is horrible," one man said.

"Oh Lord, have mercy. What in the world happened?" another woman said during her call.

A few callers stayed calm. One man described the size of a section of the building that collapsed and softly said there were probably people still inside.

"Send whatever you got, buddy," he told the dispatcher.

Federal investigators have blamed a natural gas leak for the explosion at the ConAgra Foods Inc. Killed in the explosion were Barbara McLean Spears, 43, of Dunn, and two Clayton residents: Rachel Mae Poston Pulley, 67, and Lewis Junior Watson, 33.

Meanwhile, two injured workers sued a contractor Monday, saying that company is responsible for the natural gas leak.

WRAL-TV and The News & Observer of Raleigh reported that Leonard Spruill and Tammie O'Neal filed a civil lawsuit against Raleigh-based Southern Industrial Constructors.

Southern Industrial President John Wilson said he had not seen the lawsuit. He told

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the newspaper that about five employees are assigned to ConAgra under a maintenance contract and that he's not aware of their daily assignments.

Wilson did not immediately return an after-hours message left by The Associated Press. A message left for the attorney representing the two employees also was not immediately returned.

Daniel Horowitz, a U.S. Chemical Safety Board spokesman, said the blast site was still hazardous and was hindering investigators. Neal O'Briant, a spokesman with the state Department of Labor, said it be several months before it releases the results of its investigation into whether the employer followed proper safety precautions.

Officials in Garner said they will do whatever it takes to help reopen the plant, which employs 900 in the town of 25,000. ConAgra has 25,000 employees worldwide and makes brands such as Chef Boyardee, Hunt's tomato sauce, ACT II popcorn and Hebrew National hot dogs.

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