Sugar Refinery Ignored Explosive Dust Before Blast

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SAVANNAH, Ga. (AP) — Imperial Sugar Co. and managers of its Georgia refinery ignored known dangers of explosive dust for decades before a chain of dust-fueled fireballs erupted at the plant last year and killed 14 people, investigators said in a report Thursday.

The U.S. Chemical Safety Board, which investigates industrial accidents, said it found written warnings of explosive dust hazards in refinery memos from the 1960s and that the deaths likely could have been prevented by routine housekeeping.

The agency said near-misses over the years from small fires also failed to persuade corporate managers to take the threat seriously inside the nation's second-largest sugar refinery, located a few miles west of Savannah.

"The explosion at Imperial Sugar was entirely preventable, and the deaths and injuries that occurred here in February 2008 should not have happened," John Bresland, the board's chairman, said at a news conference.

The board doesn't issue fines or sanctions. Its findings are used to make safety recommendations to policymakers and industry officials. But the findings could become a factor in more than 30 civil lawsuits filed by injured employees and relatives of workers killed in the blast.

The Feb. 7, 2008, disaster killed 14 workers and injured 36, several with horrific second- and third-degree burns.

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration last year cited Imperial Sugar for 211 workplace safety violations at its refineries in Georgia and Gramercy, La.

It recommended $8.7 million in fines against the company — the third-highest penalty in the agency's history. The company is contesting the fine. No criminal charges have been filed.

The report concluded that the initial blast ignited inside a conveyor belt that carried sugar from the refinery's towering storage silos to a vast packaging plant where workers bagged sugar under the Dixie Crystals brand.

The 80-foot conveyor had been enclosed in a steel cover a year earlier to prevent contamination, but it also trapped sugar dust in dangerous concentrations. While the damage was too severe to determine the exact cause, investigators said an overheated bearing in the steel conveyor most likely ignited the dust like

gunpowder.

However, the agency blamed the workers' deaths on a chain of secondary explosions that spread through the packaging plant, fueled by layers of dust the company had allowed to collect on floors, equipment and overhead rafters.

Workers told board investigators that spilled sugar was frequently piled 2 to 3 feet deep in parts of the plant. One employee said he often had to clear a path with a squeegee so he could reach equipment.

Imperial Sugar CEO John Sheptor said in a statement Thursday the Chemical Safety Board had given the company "execellent guidance" on reducing dust hazards, but he offered no response to the report's findings that the company had ignored dust hazards and allowed dangerous conditions to exist that caused the explosions.

"We have worked very hard to make our facilities the safest possible, and will continue to share what we have learned and will learn with the CSB and industry," Sheptor said.

The board also faulted the company for failing to conduct emergency evacuation drills. Some doors and stairways were blocked with debris and there were no alarms to alert workers. They had to pass word of the catastrophe by two-way radios and cell phones.

Investigators concluded both Imperial Sugar and managers at the Georgia refinery, which the Texas company bought in 1997, long knew that sugar dust was explosive and potentially devastating.

At the refinery, investigators found an internal memo from August 1961 describing a dust explosion in the plant's powdered sugar room. A September 1967 memo to executives from an engineer at the Georgia plant noted: "This dust problem has become so serious and dangerous in modern refineries."

The memo was written more than 30 years before the Texas company bought the Georgia refinery, but internal company data sheets on safety noted "sugar dust accumulations are explosive," the report said.

In 1998, an Imperial Sugar employee suffered severe burns from a dust explosion inside the powdered sugar mill of its refinery in Sugar Land, Texas — the company's headquarters. Over the years several small fires had ignited inside the Georgia plant, but dust hazards persisted.

In 2006, the Chemical Safety Board called on OSHA to adopt new regulations on food processors, wood manufactures and other industries not included in a regulation from the 1980s that only deals with grain dust. The agency said that 281 dust fires and explosions from 1980 to 2005 had killed more than 119 American workers.

Even after the Georgia explosion, OSHA opposed a new dust regulation under the

Bush administration. After President Barack Obama took office, the Labor Department said in May it was working on a new rule.

Several labor unions criticized the board for not pushing OSHA to enact an emergency rule more quickly. Darrell Hornback, health and safety director for the International Chemical Workers Union Council, said it could take OSHA two to 10 years to adopt a new regulation.

The rebuilt Georgia plant resumed operating in June, 16 months after the explosion. The company says it has adopted voluntary standards to minimize dust hazards and included new safety features.

Shares of Imperial Sugar Co. fell $2.71, about 19 percent, to close at $11.91 in trading Thursday.

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