Plant Gas Explosion Kills Truck Driver At Highway Rest Stop

Karen Hawkins, Associated Press Writer

BELVIDERE, Ill. (AP) — A gas line exploded Monday at a technology plant in northern Illinois, sending aloft debris that killed a man at a nearby highway rest area.

The explosion rocked the NDK America Inc. plant in Belvidere, about 70 miles northwest of Chicago, sending trembles through buildings as far as a mile away and echoing throughout the community of about 20,000 people.

"It sounded like a traffic accident — a boom," said Greg Brown, a school district official. "We thought someone dropped something on the roof. It was like a little earthquake."

The man who was killed was pronounced dead at the Illinois Tollway Oasis on Interstate 90, Illinois Tollway spokeswoman Joelle McGinnis said. Boone County Coroner Rebecca Wigget identified him as truck driver Ronald Greenfield, 63, of Chesterton, Ind.

Wigget said Greenfield was walking to his truck at the rest area, which also has several restaurants, when he was struck by a large piece of flying debris. She refused to describe the extent of his injuries. An autopsy is scheduled for Wednesday.

Jim Fealtman, a regional sales manager at NDK America's office in Webster, Mass., the company's other U.S. location, said no one at the Belvidere plant was injured in the blast. He had no other information.

Three sides of the NDK plant, which makes synthetic crystals for computers, collapsed in the blast, WIFR-TV in Rockford reported.

The entrance to the plant, which is in a large empty field, was blocked Monday night. The rest area is visible from the plant.

NDK had moved to a new 55,000-square-foot factory in Belvidere in September 2003 and employs about 30 people, according to Growth Dimensions, the economic development agency for the city of Belvidere and Boone County.

The building housed four 75-ton "autoclaves" — each 50 feet tall and 3 1/2 feet in diameter — in which the crystals were grown.

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contributed to this report.

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