

Investigators Seek Answers In Blast That Killed Brothers

Joe Mandak, Associated Press

NEW CUMBERLAND, W.Va. (AP) — Investigators planned to search Friday for answers to what caused an explosion at a West Virginia chemical plant that killed two brothers in the third fatal blast at the site in 15 years.

The blast happened around 1:30 p.m. at the AL Solutions Inc. plant in New Cumberland, a small town in West Virginia's northern Panhandle about 33 miles west of Pittsburgh. Two other people were injured.

The first officer on the scene, Lt. Jeremy Krzys, said he had been sitting at a traffic light when he heard the explosion and immediately rushed to the plant.

"I just heard a loud bang and all of a sudden you saw black smoke pouring out," Krzys said.

Krzys saw two injured men run out of the building when he arrived. He said one man was badly burned, while the other was still on fire. Co-workers used blankets to extinguish the man who was on fire.

Police Chief Lester Skinner said he grew up with the brothers who were killed and never made it out of the plant: Jeffery Scott Fish, 39, and James E. Fish, 38. They lived in separate homes about 200 yards apart from each other and about five blocks from the plant.

Family and friends were gathering at the younger Fish's home a few hours after the blast. A woman outside the home declined comment for the family.

At Rebecca's Lounge, a nearby bar, Pat Jones said he knew the older brother.

"Scott was a very, very generous boy," he said. "He'd do anything for anybody, including giving you the shirt off his own back."

A third employee, 27-year-old Steven Swain, was badly burned and was flown by helicopter to get surgery and other emergency treatment at UPMC-Mercy hospital in Pittsburgh. His condition was not immediately released.

The second injured victim was Dave Williams, an outside contractor who was at the plant when the explosion happened. He was being treated for burns to his hands and face. Investigators said they did not know Williams' age, what kind of work he was performing or the name of his employer.

The company reported earlier Thursday night that three workers had been killed,

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

based on information from emergency responders. Chief financial officer Ken Kline corrected the information about two hours later, saying the company was told erroneously that the badly burned employee died on the way to the Pittsburgh hospital.

"Our immediate concern is for our employees and their families," the company said in a statement. "We are deferring further comment until emergency responders and investigators do their work and we have more information from that investigation."

Officials with the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration arrived at the scene Thursday night around the time it was safe to enter the building.

Hancock County Sheriff's Chief Deputy Todd Murray said there would be a joint investigation by the federal agency, state officials and law enforcement.

The plant site is home to a large, corrugated metal building complex and a smaller stucco-and-cinder-block building that sits across the parking lot, which is where the victims were working. Skinner said they were working with titanium powder, which is used as an alloy additive in aluminum.

The powder is packed into bricks that look similar to hockey pucks, Skinner said. It's highly flammable and burns much hotter than wood or other fuels, which is why firefighters had to finish extinguishing hot spots before investigators could get to the dead men inside.

"You can still feel the heat now in the building and off the walls," Murray said about seven hours after the blast.

Assistant State Fire Marshal Brad Hartley said there was both a fire and an explosion, but "we don't know which came first."

AL Solutions was formerly called Jamegy Inc. In August 1995, a worker was killed and another injured when an explosion and fire ripped through the West Virginia plant when it was operated by Jamegy. In 2006, another worker died following an explosion and fire in a production building there.

At the Mid-Ridge Cafe, which sits along the main highway that leads into town and overlooks the plant, waitress Sandy Lemasters said she didn't hear the blast that was just a mile away. But it didn't take long for people to start coming in to talk about what happened.

"They came in and said there were two dead," she said. "It's a shame. That's the third time it's happened there."

Associated Press writer Vicki Smith contributed to this report from Morgantown, W.Va.

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Source URL (retrieved on 07/29/2014 - 3:11pm):

<http://www.impomag.com/news/2010/12/investigators-seek-answers-blast-killed-brothers>