

## Hoeganaes Corp. Says It Is Improving Safety

Travis Loller, Associated Press

GALLATIN, Tenn. (AP) — A Gallatin metal powders factory where five workers died in flash fires earlier this year said in a statement Wednesday that it is improving safety at the plant.

The Hoeganaes (HAY'-gan-eez) Corp. issued its statement hours after the release of a highly critical investigative report by the U.S. Chemical Safety Board. The federal agency found that airborne iron dust at Hoeganaes ignited and created a fireball, burning workers in separate accidents in January, March and May of this year.

Board members said the accidents were preventable.

Hoeganaes said Wednesday that the company is developing what it called "an industry leading powder metal dust management system." The statement said this and other actions are being taken "to ensure that similar accidents will not happen again."

The Cinnaminson, N.J.,-based company produces atomized steel and iron powders for the automotive and other industries with facilities in the U.S., Germany, China and Romania. It is a subsidiary of GKN, a British multinational engineering company.

The Safety Board presented the results of its investigation into the three accidents during a public meeting in Gallatin where the widow of one of the workers killed at the Hoeganaes plant spoke on a panel.

Chris Sherburne, whose husband Wiley Sherburne died in January, told the board, "I've been asked to explain how our lives have been affected. I don't know if I can actually do that.

"Everything changed that morning. We walked into the hospital and the first thing the doctors told us was that he was burned on 95 percent of his body and they didn't think he was going to make it. There's nothing you can say to that."

She said the five workers who were killed have, all told, left several children behind.

"Everyday something they say or something they do — it's heartbreaking. And the questions they ask, there's just no answer," she said.

Safety board investigators at the meeting blamed the accidents on a thick accumulation of combustible iron dust throughout the facility, and said the likely ignition source for the January accident that killed Wiley Sherburne and a co-worker was an electrical arc from exposed wiring that was not properly grounded.

In a subsequent accident in March that caused one injury, the dust may have been

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ignited by an open-flamed furnace. In another accident in May that killed three workers, hydrogen gas leaking from a corroded pipe exploded and then ignited falling dust.

Hoeganaes said in its statement that the Gallatin plant, which employs about 180 people, temporarily ceased production after the May 27 explosion and the company hired two outside firms to undertake a comprehensive safety review. Some of the recommendations being implemented include an upgrade of the electrical systems and replacement of the gas and air supply system. The company also says it is upgrading "gas management and hydrogen detection systems."

Investigators criticized management for having no regular maintenance and inspection of the hydrogen lines and no procedure for how to deal with suspected leaks.

The safety board also found that multiple reports of earlier small fires, and even a deadly fire in 1996 at a New Jersey facility, did not spur Hoeganaes to try to mitigate the hazard. And it found workers were given no training to help them understand the dangers they faced.

According to the company's statement, it is undertaking "full and comprehensive retraining of all employees."

Investigators also faulted the Gallatin Fire Department for not recognizing that the iron dust accumulated on surfaces around the plant were a fire hazard when it inspected two weeks before the May accident.

According to the Hoeganaes statement, "The Company deeply regrets the loss of life at Gallatin" and is "taking every measure to ensure that Gallatin operates to world class standards."

At the safety board meeting, investigator David Chicca was asked about measures Hoeganaes has taken to improve safety.

Chicca said during his last tour in August, the company was vacuuming up the dust and had made some effort to seal the dust collection system but had not yet done enough to guarantee that there would not be further accidents.

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