

Police: Fire Erupts At LA Chemical Plant

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Mary Foster, Associated Press

GEISMAR, La. (AP) — An explosion and fire at a chemical plant Thursday in southeastern Louisiana caused the release of hazardous vinyl chloride into the air, authorities said.

No one was injured at the Westlake Vinyls plant in the Geismar community, an area home to a large number of chemical plants and refineries that dot the Mississippi River from Baton Rouge to New Orleans.

State police spokesman Russell Graham said it wasn't clear how much of the chemical was released, but a small cloud was hovering over the plant. A handful of residents living in the area were advised to stay indoors, keep doors and windows closed and turn off air conditioning units for about three hours.

The plant's owner, Houston-based Westlake Chemical Corp., said the blast occurred about 8 a.m. during the restarting of a vinyl chloride monomer unit. State police said the fire was out by 9:20 a.m.

Karen Khonsari, the plant's environmental, health and safety officer, said the monomer was used in the manufacturing of plastic pipe.

The Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality also said there were releases of hydrochloric acid and chlorine. State police said the lines involved in the releases had been shut down.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has determined that vinyl chloride is a known cancer-causing substance.

A 44-mile stretch of the nearby Mississippi River was closed as a precaution since winds were blowing in the river's direction, said Ascension Parish spokesman Lester Kenyon. Kenyon said the wind was blowing away from about a dozen residences in the area and other plants.

Westlake Chemical said the cause of the explosion was not known. A line of strong thunderstorms passed through the region Thursday morning.

Air monitoring units were dispatched to the area to monitor pollution and a team from the federal Environmental Protection Agency was en route, officials said. Several major roads were blocked in the area to all but emergency traffic, Graham said.

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