Family Seeks Answers After Death At Tuna Plant

The Associated Press

SANTA FE SPRINGS, Calif. (AP) — Workplace safety investigators and a grieving family on Monday searched for an explanation of how a worker was cooked to death at a Bumble Bee tuna processing plant.

Tony Melena said his 62-year-old father, Jose Melena, was killed in an accident last week at the Santa Fe Springs plant but the company has given the family no information about how he died.

"All they came and did was notify my mother that he had lost his life in an accident, and that's it," said Melena, who is one of the victim's six children. "We don't have any official report."

Police received a 911 call from the Bumble Bee plant Thursday morning to report an industrial accident. When officers arrived, they found the man dead.

Bumble Bee Foods LLC, which reopened the plant Monday, expressed its sadness at Melena's death. The accident occurred during the canning phase of tuna processing, the company said, when tuna cans are sealed, cleaned and placed inside a pressure cooker before they are cooled, labeled and packed for shipment.

Melena worked pushing baskets of sealed cans into the pressure cooker, said Pat Menke, the company's vice president of human resources.

"He had worked at the facility for six years in that position and was considered a skilled and knowledgeable employee," Menke said.

Craig Harvey, a spokesman for the Los Angeles County coroner's office, said coroner's officials would investigate the death Monday.

The California Division of Occupational Safety and Health may take up to six months to probe the incident at the plant, said spokesman Peter Melton.

"It's early in the investigation so we don't have much to report at this time," he said.

Tony Melena said the family is looking for answers to how this could happen at the plant southeast of Los Angeles. He said his father was an avid gardener who didn't drink or smoke and was always trying to set an example for his now-grown children.

"He was a great, great dad," Melena said. "He was trying to set an example for everybody."

More than 300 people died in fatal occupational injuries in California in 2010, according to Cal/OSHA statistics.

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