

TX Fertilizer Plant Targeted By Thieves In Past

Nomaan Merchant, Associated Press

WEST, Texas (AP) — Burglars occasionally sneaked into and around a Texas fertilizer plant in the years before a [massive, deadly explosion](#) [1]— sometimes looking for a chemical fertilizer stored at the plant that can be used to make methamphetamine, according to local sheriff's records.

Sheriff's deputies were called more than 10 times to West Fertilizer in the 11 years before an April 17 blast that killed 14 people, injured 200 and leveled part of the tiny town of West, according to McLennan County sheriff's office files released through an open-records request. Multiple calls involved suspicion that anhydrous ammonia was being stolen.

The records portray a plant with no outer fence that was a sporadic target of intruders. Law enforcement was occasionally called because someone had noticed the smell of gas outside or signs of an intruder.

Anhydrous ammonia is a fertilizer that is a frequent target of burglars trying to manufacture methamphetamine. In the right conditions it can be flammable or explosive, though that is nearly impossible outdoors. However, a leak of the gas could create a potentially fatal toxic chemical cloud. The plant also had an unspecified amount of ammonium nitrate, a chemical that has been used in explosives, like in the Oklahoma City bombing.

A spokeswoman for the Texas State Fire Marshal's office, which is investigating the explosion, said the anhydrous ammonia tanks stored at West Fertilizer at the time of the blast appeared to have no scorch marks or any sign that they were part of a blast that left a crater more than 90 feet wide.

Officials have not ruled out the role of an intruder or other criminal activity being involved. Ten first responders and two people volunteering to help fight the initial fire died in the explosion.

Matt Cawthon, the chief deputy sheriff in McLennan County, said in an interview Friday that anhydrous ammonia theft calls had declined in recent years, as had the number of meth labs authorities have busted as Mexican drug cartels are smuggling in more of the drug.

"The thefts ... and the reports for law enforcement assistance in that area, in my estimation, were minor and were petty," Cawthon said.

There were no reports that ammonium nitrate had been stolen from the plant, Cawthon said.

"If ammonium nitrate had been stolen ... then that report would have generated

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probably a lot of attention," he said.

Federal regulation of ammonium nitrate is largely focused on the safe storage of the chemical, for fear it will fall into the hands of criminals or terrorists. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security is responsible for oversight of the potentially explosive substance.

At the West facility, criminals appeared to be interested in the ammonia.

A West police officer in 2002 pulled over someone driving through West Fertilizer with his vehicle's headlights off, according to a sheriff's crime report. The police officer reported that "there have been numerous thefts of anhydrous ammonia" from the plant, the report says. But that driver was found to have taken a hydraulic hay spear.

That same year, a plant employee told authorities that someone was stealing 4 to 5 gallons of anhydrous ammonia about every three days, according to another report. Sheriff's office records released Friday did not indicate that authorities were being called that often.

In more recent calls, an employee had noticed signs that someone had gone through the office without taking anything. In one 2009 record, someone reported that the TV in the office was left on a Spanish-language channel. The year before, an intruder appeared to have viewed pornography on a secretary's computer.

In another 2009 record, Cody Dragoo — a plant employee and first responder who died fighting the fire — called authorities to report two men who were seen on the plant's security tape entering part of the facility. The only things found missing were a cabinet lock and a box of Oreo cookies, according to a report. It's unclear if the men were identified or arrested.

Reuters first reported on the break-ins, based on police records.

West Fertilizer did not have a fence or security guards, and just one security camera was installed, Cawthon said. Besides the costs of adding security, the plant was often visited after hours by farmers needing fertilizer.

"If the owner was to spend that money to make this a fortress, it would decrease his business because the farmers can't come and go," Cawthon said.

Daniel Keeney, a spokesman for Adair Grain, which owned and operated the plant, declined to answer questions about plant security to avoid "misunderstandings or confusions."

Last month's explosion occurred during the spring planting season, when the plant was especially busy, officials in the investigation have said. Two months before the explosion, plant officials reported they could store as much as 270 tons of ammonium nitrate.

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Teams from the state fire marshal's office and the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives are hoping to determine how much ammonium nitrate was on site when the blast occurred by studying the 90-foot-crater left in the explosion and combing through records.

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