

Plant blast preventable, probers say Wyman-Gordon fined \$1.8 million

By ERIC HANSON Staff
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A December nitrogen tank blast that killed eight men at a northwest Harris County metal-forging plant "could and should have been prevented," a federal investigation has found.

Wyman-Gordon Metal Forging Inc. must pay \$1.8 million in fines for the 35 safety violations found by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

"This is an incident that could and should have been prevented," said Gregory R. Watchman, acting assistant secretary of labor for occupational safety and health, at a Wednesday news conference. "The penalty is appropriate to send a message to all employers that putting workers in grave danger is not acceptable in America in 1997."

Watchman said the company agreed to pay the penalties and to make safety improvements at five plants across the nation.

The accident happened the night of Dec. 22 while workers were trying to remove the cap from a 90-foot-tall tank in order to change the seals, a procedure that was being done for the first time in about 20 years. The vessel was one of 16 storing nitrogen and water that are used to drive gigantic hydraulic presses.

The workers mistakenly thought the tank had been emptied and began to remove 16 bolts that held the 3,000-pound cap in place.

After 11 bolts had been taken out, the nitrogen, under pressure of 5,000 pounds per square inch, suddenly blasted the cap off. The cap went through the roof of the northwest Harris County facility and landed nearly 200 yards away.

Killed were Amos Lightfoot, 56, Donald Terry, 60, James Brooks Jr., 55, Enrique Uribe, 57, Steven Nagy, 29, Michael Gunn, 26, Brian Meche, 27, and Jody Norred, 24.

Injured were Gregory Dargin, 31, and

Jimmy Galindo, 57.

Watchman said the investigation disclosed that the company failed to properly use "lockout/tagout" standards and procedures to service such machinery. The standard requires that machinery not only be turned off, but that it be locked in such a way to prevent release of any stored energy it may contain.

"In this instance, lockout was required to make sure that any tank the workers were prepared to perform maintenance on had been depressurized in advance of their work," Watchman said.

Watchman said the company did not have a specific procedure in place for this particular operation and that employees who carried out the task had never been trained to do it.

"The tanks did not have individual pressure gauges, so it was very difficult for the workers to know whether the tanks were pressurized or not," he said.

There was some debate about whether the release valve on the tank had been opened, OSHA spokeswoman Sherrie Moran said. Federal investigators believe a pin in the valve was broken, so turning it would not release the pressure. Workers would have no way of knowing this because there were no gauges on the tank, only on the manifold into which all the tanks fed, Moran said.

In the agreement reached between the government and Wyman-Gordon the company agreed to pay the fine's full amount within 12 days.

The company has also agreed to full abatement of all safety hazards that OSHA identified, to hire a full-time safety and health director and to establish a safety program at its other plants across the nation.

Wallace F. Whitney Jr., vice president and general counsel of Wyman-Gordon, said the company disagrees with OSHA's findings but has agreed to the settlement to avoid the costs, uncertainty and diversion of management resources that litigation would cause.

"The time has come to get this matter behind us and continue our efforts to make the Houston plant the safest in the industry," Whitney said in a released statement.

"To this end we have agreed with OSHA to hire a full-time safety manager for the Houston operations, to retain an outside consultant to advise us and certify to OSHA that procedural issues in the plant have been addressed, and to strengthen our already active joint union-management safety committee," he said.

One of the unions representing workers at the plant welcomed the agreement between the company and OSHA, saying it will directly benefit workers at the plant.

Officials with the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers said the agreement will strengthen safety and health matters at the plant.

The settlement reached between OSHA and the company does not have any direct impact on possible litigation between the company and the families of the dead workers, Watchman said.

Houston attorney Richard Mithoff, who is representing two of the families, said OSHA's findings are consistent with what his own investigation found.

"We hope to complete our own investigation in about 30 days. We'll know at that point what action if any will be necessary," he said.

Mithoff said OSHA officials gave a briefing on their findings to the families.

"It was very emotional for them to relive it," he said.

Meanwhile, the company and union officials have decided to establish a memorial on plant property to honor those who died, said Guy Brown of Brown Nelson Public Relations.

Brown said a committee consisting of plant workers and union representatives is studying design proposals.