

NDK review may take months

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RRSTAR.COM

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BELVIDERE — A swarm of federal, state and local investigators will spend Wednesday and the next several months determining what triggered a fatal explosion Monday at NDK America Inc. on Crystal Parkway and whether the company violated various health and safety regulations.

Flying debris from the explosion killed an Indiana truck driver at the nearby Belvidere Oasis. Debris also injured an employee at the neighboring Grupo Antolin plant. NDK officials offered their condolences for the victims in a written statement today.

OSHA contact

Regional inspectors from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration were at the scene Monday to begin examining whether safety and health requirements were met at the plant.

"It could take some while to get the results simply because of the severity of the explosion," said Department of Labor spokesman Scott Allen. "We're allowed by law up to six months to conduct the investigation. I can't say we always take that long, but there's a severity to this."

"If there's something that we identify that might have gone wrong because of a safety violation, that's what we'll note, and that's what will come out in our investigation."

Penalties could be assessed if an investigation shows wrongdoing, he said.

"It goes from everything to 'hey, you need to make sure this is fixed' to quite significant fines," he said. "Our focus is primarily on safety and health issues at the building. Our objective is to make sure this is a very thorough investigation."

OSHA received initial contact of the situation in Belvidere from media, then confirmed it with the Belvidere Fire Department, Allen said, noting NDK wasn't required by guidelines to call in the accident.

"In this particular case, because there were not three people injured who belonged to the company or a fatality within the company, technically (NDK) wouldn't have had to contact OSHA," he said. "If there were, they'd be required to contact OSHA within eight hours."

More investigators

Staff and members from the Washington-based U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board will be in town starting Wednesday, confirmed Daniel Horowitz, director of Congressional, Public, and Board Affairs for the U.S. Chemical Safety Board.

Board member William B. Wark, three investigators and a public affairs representative will arrive in Belvidere and are expected to investigate what chemicals were involved and whether clean air was endangered, he said.

"We investigate about 15 of the most serious chemical actions across the country each year," he said. "For us, this is certainly among the most serious. We are equally distraught by the fatality of a member of the public and are required under the Clean Air Act to investigate any incident of this type. We're going to try to get to the bottom of what happened and give safety recommendations to prevent something like this from ever happening again."

According to the group's Web site, www.chemsafety.gov, it is composed of five members who are appointed by the president and confirmed by the U.S. Senate.

Also expected to arrive in town are members of Homeland Security. The slew of investigators and agencies already assisting in investigation efforts includes area police and fire departments, the state fire marshal, and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency.

No cause determined

Ken Arnold of the state fire marshal's office said the cause of the explosion remains under investigation, but one source already might be ruled out.

"It doesn't appear to be a gas explosion," Arnold said. "They have a series of pressure vessels, and we're looking into the possibility one of those vessels released."

Belvidere fire Chief Dave Worrell said it's too early to rule anything out, but a gas-sourced blast isn't likely to be named the cause.

"A lot of people talked about smelling gas, but there is a gas distribution center roughly one block away (from NDK), and it's pretty typical to get whiffs of that around that station," he said. "That may be making people think it's gas-related with an explosion like that, but it's not always the case."

Worrell told the Register Star on Monday that one of the pressurized vessels where synthetic quartz crystal is grown at the west end

of the building exploded.

The Police Department continues to remain on scene to protect the site along with Boone County Emergency Management volunteers, said Belvidere police Chief Jan Noble.

Company statement

NDK Crystal acting President Ken Hennessey said the company did not know the source of the explosion as of today. He estimates 23 of 31 employees were in the building at the time of the explosion. The company is participating in investigation efforts.

“We’re very busy at this time,” he said.

In a prepared statement, the company said it remains committed to safety and quality. The company also explained how it felt about the death of 63-year-old Ronald Greenfield of Chesterton, Ind., who was in the parking lot of the Interstate 90 oasis when hit by debris.

“Our thoughts and prayers go out to the family of the victim during this difficult time,” the release said. “We are thankful that there were no other serious injuries, including no injuries to our plant employees.”

The NDK facility on Crystal Parkway houses NDK Crystal and NDK America Inc. and serves as the North American headquarters for their Japan-based parent company, Nihon Dempa Kogyo Co. Ltd.

The tall, 55,000-square-foot building, visible from Interstate 90, opened in 2003 at a cost of \$12.5 million. Inside the building are several 50-foot-tall, 75-ton vessels in which synthetic quartz crystal is grown. That crystal is used to make frequency-control devices, which NDK then sells to mobile telephone makers and others for use in electronic devices.

Staff writer Betsy López Fritscher can be reached at bfritsch@rrstar.com or 815-544-3452.

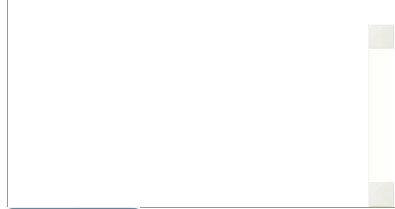
Comments (10)

sickofitz

6 days ago

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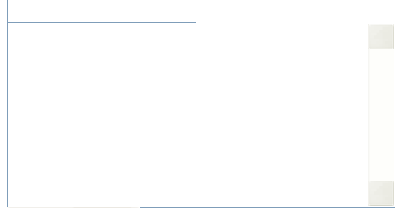
Since this company was aware of the danger of an explosion and built the walls to blow away and protect the building why didn't they also put up a barrier wall within 100 ft. to protect others from flying debris? They should have bought enough land so that they were the only building on the property and had a large enough wall to protect the citizens in the surrounding area. Maybe the semi truck driver would be alive if they had.

HARD_MEDIA_BIAS_IN_ROCKFORD

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These crystals can only be made under pressure, with any thing under pressure we have a chance of an explosion, no way around this fact. That being said a factory like this should only be placed in a rural area to prevent possible deaths from flying objects.

FreedomLover

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sickofitz has a great point. If NDK rebuilds, hopefully they will be required to put up a barrier wall to protect the area immediately surrounding their facility.

Beyond that . . . Board member William B. Wark, three investigators and a public affairs representative will arrive in Belvidere and are expected to investigate what chemicals were involved and whether clean air was endangered, he said. "I think NDK, Wark, and the investigators should go to the White House and have a beer to hash this matter out.

rr_chump

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and how tall would this wall be to protect others from flying debris? Debris does not only fly outward but in all directions. it is VERY possible that even if they had a 30' tall wall 100' from the building that the gentleman at the oasis could still have been killed due to the trajectory of the peice.

I would think its safe to assume due to the distance between the oasis and the NDK plant, that the peice that killed him left the building with a rather high arch and fast flight path.

as for forcing a company to build in a rural area, the company first has to get the permission of the county board as well as other local offices to get the proper permits so a person should start there to petition it if they would like to see it as a rule/law at some point.

curmudgeon

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Let's not forget, businesses also have to consider sewer service when they are located in rural areas.

pgctg141

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This is Boone County Illinois...some people or corporations can find building inspectors and departments easy to deal with and others can't. Its hard to tell why this building was approved with high pressure vessels inside being that close to the tollway or oasis. There is confusion, inconsistency and so many hoops to jump through over here that perhaps someone missed something along the way,...oh yeah, and the steep learning curve. I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of it since the Feds are here to help. Just what we need, more politicians!

FreedomLover

5 days ago

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I still think they should all just go to the WH and have a beer . . . then everything will be fine.

goingbust

5 days ago

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'Since this company was aware of the danger of an explosion and built the walls to blow away and protect the building why didn't they also put up a barrier wall within 100 ft. to protect others from flying debris?'

I wondered about that myself. If you look closely at the Sundstrand plant out on Alpine and Harrison they have a test stand building to the south and west, away from the main building. There is at least one thick concrete barrier wall between the main building and this test stand. That is the way to do things.

sickofitz
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rr_chump, I have no idea how tall the wall should be, but with the knowledge that there was a chance of an explosion, safety in all areas should have been considered. There are many intelligent people out there who CAN figure those things out. If there is no way in a populated area to insure safety to surrounding areas, then HARD_MEDIA_BIAS_IN_ROCKFORD suggestion of building it in a rural area is the logical solution. And as for sewer service that would not be a major problem.

FCPHOO
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This is the best written news article that I have read on what happened at NDK- Some items that could help. Most of the US run crystal growing autoclaves (which have closed due to oversea competition) are built into or underground. Just the top of the vessels are above ground to allow access to the product. This is the first that I have seen above ground. Mother earth would have greatly stop the debris from traveling as far. The material inside is silicon dioxide which is very safe.

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