

Conn. committee seeks to ban 'gas blows' at plants

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A state commission on Tuesday recommended that "gas blows," the process blamed for a deadly power plant explosion in Middletown, be banned in Connecticut until new national standards are put in place.

A panel created by Gov. M. Jodi Rell approved seven recommendations it will present to her in the coming days. The list includes the "gas blow" ban, more training for regulatory personnel and creating a "coordinating council" of state agencies to share information during the construction of large power plants.

The commission's chairman, acting Department of Public Safety Commissioner James "Skip" Thomas, said some of the recommendations may be enacted by Rell using her executive authority and others may require legislative approval.

"I'm comfortable that almost all of the seven recommendations that we put forth are going to be approved," he said. "What we tried to do in this whole process was be reasonable — what's reasonable, what's going to ensure public safety."

The under-construction Kleen Energy plant exploded Feb. 7 when something ignited natural gas and air that had accumulated during a procedure known as a gas blow, in which high-pressure gas is forced through pipes to clean them.

Six workers died and 50 were injured.

The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration in August imposed \$16.6 million in fines against companies involved in the blast. The fines, the third-highest imposed for a single accident, stemmed from 371 alleged safety and workplace violations.

The U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board, which also reviewed the blast, said gas blows are inherently unsafe and has urged companies to use other methods. In August, a representative of the board urged Connecticut to adopt legislation prohibiting flammable gas from being used to clean gas piping.

State officials have said, at the time of the blast, there was no state agency charged with overseeing the gas blow.

The commission led by Thomas is the second of two groups created by Rell in the wake of the Kleen Energy explosion. The first was charged with identifying the cause of the blast and any contributing factors.

Thomas' panel was asked to recommend specific steps, legislative and regulatory,

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that can be taken to make sure a similar tragedy doesn't happen again.

The group's other recommendations include requiring an applicant of a power-generating plant to pay for one or more special inspectors to help the local fire marshal and building inspector, and adopting various updated fire and building code regulations.

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