Feds Call for Safer Storage Tanks after Explosions

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JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — Explosions from oil and natural gas tanks tucked away in isolated areas killed 44 people in the last three decades, federal regulators said Thursday as they called on companies and officials to make the storage sites safer.

Thousands of tanks are in places where young people hang out. Those killed were all 25 or younger, often at unsecured sites that did not have warning signs or fences, according to a report released by the U.S. Chemical Safety Board. Several of the explosions have been sparked by cigarette smoking.

Three accidents in the last two years have highlighted the problems. An explosion in south Mississippi in 2009 killed two teenagers in a clearing in the woods near the small town of Carnes. Six months later, another person died while exploring a similar storage site in Oklahoma. Two weeks after that, a 24-year-old woman died when a tank exploded in New London, Texas, near the Louisiana state line.

"All three incidents involved rural unmanned oil and gas storage sites that lacked fencing and signs warning of the hazards, which might have otherwise deterred members of the public from using them as places to gather," the report said.

Board Chair Rafael Moure-Eraso said during a conference call with reporters that federal, state and local authorities should learn from these tragedies and enact stronger regulations.

"The team determined that there is a lack of consistent state or municipally mandated regulations for perimeter fencing, locks, and signage. These safeguards would warn of potential hazards and deter access," Moure-Eraso said. "Public safety is rarely considered in municipal or state rules for constructing or maintaining tanks on oil and gas well sites, even for new construction."

Moure-Eraso also said CSB "could not identify any specific federal standards or industry guidance" on securing the sites.

Some of the sites have little more than a few tanks connected by catwalks in the woods near residential areas. Many don't have locks on hatches and can leak highly flammable vapors. Young people party at the sites while others ride all-terrain vehicles. Hunters use catwalks as elevated platforms to fire from. Investigators working the New London explosion found gang graffiti and a child's pink bike at the site.

The agency identified 26 incidents between 1983 and 2010 that resulted in the deaths and 25 injuries.

Some of the other accidents include a 2007 explosion that killed two teenagers in Rio Blanco County, Colo.; four teens killed in an explosion in Long Lake, Texas in 2003; and one teen killed in Heflin, La. in 2001.

A cigarette lighter was found at the scene in Mississippi two years ago, but the board said in its report that "there was no evidence that it was the ignition source." About a year later, county officials adopted rules that would require companies to install perimeter fencing around sites, post appropriate signs and provide 24-hour telephone numbers in case of emergencies. Authorities said the oil company that owned the site has challenged the rules in court.

In the Oklahoma accident, a 21-year-old man and another friend were on the catwalk of an unsecured storage facility near Weleetka on April 14, 2010, when a 210-barrel capacity tank exploded.

Witness told authorities the victim was on the catwalk connecting the tanks when he looked into a hatch, possibly while smoking. His friend was "walking behind him in the dark and struck his lighter to see. Vapors from the tank ignited and an explosion ensued."

In New London, Texas, on April 26, 2010, an oil tank explosion killed a 24-year-old woman and seriously injured a 25-year-old man.

"The CSB learned that two individuals were climbing the stairway of the catwalk when one victim asked the other to light a cigarette. Witness testimony revealed that when the second victim lit the cigarette, an explosion ensued," the report said.

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http://www.chem.info/news/2011/10/feds-call-safer-storage-tanks-after-explosions