

# Search for Three Presumed Dead in Blast Resuming

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ATCHISON, Kan. (AP) — Unstable concrete, hanging steel beams and other damage caused by a powerful explosion that ripped through a Kansas grain elevator are complicating efforts to find three more people likely killed in the blast.

Crews were hoping to stabilize the debris and resume their search Monday in the Bartlett Grain Co. facility in Atchison, about 50 miles northwest of Kansas City. The bodies of three other workers were recovered after the Saturday blast, and two people are hospitalized with severe burns.

The explosion was a harrowing reminder of the dangers workers face inside elevators brimming with highly combustible grain dust at the end of harvest season. The blast fired an orange fireball into the night sky, shot off a chunk of the grain distribution building directly above the elevator and blew a large hole in the side of a concrete silo.

The search for three people presumed dead — another worker and two grain inspectors — was temporarily halted Sunday because of fears that the building could fall on rescuers. Local officials met with victims' families to explain why crews pulled back, but understood they wanted their loved ones found, Atchison City Manager Trey Cocking said.

"Uncertainty is always the worst for folks," he said late Sunday, as candlelight vigils were held near the still smoldering building.

The three Bartlett workers whose bodies have been recovered were identified as Chad Roberts, 20; Ryan Federinko, 21; and John Burke, 24. Bartlett officials said the three others are presumed dead and search crews have a good idea where they were at the time of the explosion.

Among the missing was Travis Keil, a war veteran who had served as a site inspector for 16 years. His parents, Gary and Ramona Keil, drove from Salina to Atchison to wait with his three children — ages 8, 12 and 15 — as crews searched.

"We have all our prayers working for him," Gary Keil said. "It's a parent's worst nightmare to go through this."

Bartlett Grain President Bill Fellows said in a statement that workers were loading a train with corn when the explosion occurred, but the cause of the explosion remained unclear. The company brought in a South Dakota-based engineer with expertise in such accidents to help federal safety investigators at the scene.

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Over the past four decades, there have been more than 600 explosions at grain elevators, killing more than 250 people and injuring more than 1,000, according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Last year, there were grain explosions or fires in several states including Nebraska, Illinois, Ohio, South Dakota and Louisiana. None was fatal, but several sent workers scrambling, and one in Toledo, Ohio, in September 2010 forced people to evacuate from a nearby mobile home park.

When grain is handled at elevators, it creates dust that floats around inside the storage facility. The finer the grain dust particles, the greater its volatility. Typically, something — perhaps sparks from equipment or a cigarette — ignites the dust. That sends a pressure wave that detonates the rest of the floating dust in the facility.

Fireballs are a common feature of grain dust explosions, where intense heat from the blast can reach 1,500 to 2,000 degrees.

Dust from corn is among the most dangerous. Most dust explosions happen in late summer and early fall when old, dried grain is being cleaned out of elevators in preparation for the harvest. Freshly harvested corn is less explosive because it's wetter.

The Atchison elevator, which is federally licensed to handle up to 1.18 million bushels, is among roughly 850-plus elevators in Kansas. The state is now winding up its fall harvest of corn, sorghum and soybeans.

OSHA has expanded its inspections and efforts to control volatile grain dust in Kansas elevators since an explosion in 1998 at DeBruce Grain, Inc.'s facility in Haysville, which killed seven workers and injured 10 others, said Tom Tunnell, executive director of the Kansas Grain and Feed Association, the industry group representing Kansas grain elevators.

He said the industry as a whole has increased awareness of the dangers since a number of elevator explosions along the Gulf in the 1970s.

"If ever an industry is as well trained, it is ours. We understand dust is an explosive agent and our members work hard to control it," Tunnell said Sunday.

The Atchison facility where the blast occurred has not been cited for any violations in the last 10 years, according to OSHA data, though Bartlett Grain Co. was cited after two people died in separate incidents at two of its other facilities. Neither of those fatalities involved explosions at grain elevators.

In 2007, a Bartlett Grain maintenance employee died in a fall from a work platform at the company's facility in St. Joseph, Mo. In 2004, another employee died while operating a lift that fell backward at a company site in Kansas City, Mo.

"The industry has had a good record — except for a few of this type — considering the billions and billions of bushels of grain handled," Tunnell said.

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The two people injured in the explosion were taken to the burn unit at University of Kansas Hospital in Kansas City, Kan., hospital spokesman Dennis McCulloch said. One was listed in critical condition Sunday evening and the other was in serious condition, he said.

Cocking said four other people, including one woman, escaped without injuries.

Paul Moccia, who lives about a half mile from the grain elevator, said the explosion shook his house and lights flickered across his neighborhood for about 30 seconds.

"It was extremely loud. It was kind of like to me a double whomp — a bomp bomp. It reverberated, and kind of echoed down through the valley ... kind of like a shock wave," said Moccia, 57. "Everybody came outside. Neighbors were trying to figure out what was going on. It was quite a thump."

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*Hegeman reported from Wichita, Kan. Associated Press Writer Maria Sudekum Fisher contributed to this report from Kansas City, Mo.*

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