OSHA fines El Dorado-based chemical plant

ALLISON GATLIN - El Dorado News-Times - Associated Press

Great Lakes Chemical Corp. has been hit with more than $100,000 in fines by the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration for 18 serious violations the federal agency alleges exposed employees at the El Dorado facility to unexpected releases of bromine, according to the citation and penalty notification.

The violations stem from a December 2011 inspection by OSHA's Little Rock office within the agency's Process Safety Management Covered Chemical Facilities National Emphasis Program, which was designed as a method of reducing workplace issues related to the release of hazardous chemicals, according to an OSHA release.

Inspectors found a number of violations including improperly installed valves, relief devices and expansion chambers, incorrect liner used to prevent the release of bromine, the control room's proximity to highly hazardous chemical storage and process areas, and equipment inspection failures.

A number of the violations note that their occurrence was in the bromine unit where "these conditions exposed employees to the hazards associated with uncontrolled releases of ammonia, chlorine, sulfur dioxide and bromine liquid and/or vapors into the atmosphere," according to the notification.

The company has 15 days to respond to the violations which taken together amount to $122,000 in penalties ranging from $5,000 to $7,000 apiece.

Little Rock's OSHA director Carlos Reynolds noted the health issues any inadvertent releases could have on any employees in proximity, according to a release.

"By failing to ensure that safeguards are in place, Great Lakes Chemical puts its workers at risk of exposure to bromine, a highly hazardous chemical that can cause severe burns to the eyes, nose, throat and respiratory system," he wrote. "Process safety management procedures must be followed to prevent the unexpected release of toxic, reactive or flammable liquids and gases in processes involving highly hazardous chemicals."

Great Lakes, which scheduled an informal conference with OSHA representatives within the prescribed 15 days to further discuss the violations, explained in a media statement that the company began working with OSHA when the program was announced in November to identify opportunities for improvement.

"Although the results of OSHA's review show that Great Lakes Chemical's Central Plant had no willful citations, there were recommendations that the company will seek to improve immediately," stated the release. "The health and safety of our

employees, neighbors and community as a whole is of paramount importance to Great Lakes Chemical, and we continuously strive to improve our safety systems. We appreciate the opportunity OSHA provided by coming to our facility to assist in this on-going process."

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