

Firm Indicted in Woman's Ammonia Death

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MEG KINNARD, Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Federal officials have charged a Georgia transportation company in a 2009 ammonia leak that killed a South Carolina woman.

According to court documents filed this week, a federal grand jury returned an indictment against Werner Transportation Services Inc. for alleged violations of the Clean Air Act.

The wrong type of hose was used as 7,000 pounds of ammonia gas were being transferred to a Werner truck at a Tanner Industries distribution facility in Lexington County on July 15, 2009, according to the state Department of Health and Environmental Control. The hose ruptured, causing about 1,800 gallons of the 7,500 gallons on board to spill out.

Most of the ammonia — a hazardous chemical typically used in cleaning products — quickly evaporated, creating a plume of noxious gas that drifted across nearby U.S. Highway 321. Jacqueline Ginyard, 38, of Wagener, was driving to work when she encountered the cloud, tried to get out of her vehicle and was overcome by the fumes and died, according to Lexington County Coroner Harry Harman.

In all, more than a dozen people in the area received medical attention. Seven were taken to a hospital for treatment of non-life-threatening injuries, and seven others either declined treatment or were assisted at the scene. All staffers at the Tanner facility were evacuated.

Several months after the leak, the state Occupational Safety and Health Administration cited Werner for four serious violations and fined the company \$5,125. Two of its workers also weren't wearing and were not trained to use special breathing equipment, including one who finally managed to make it to the emergency shut-off valve, according to OSHA.

State workplace safety officials also fined Tanner more than \$23,000, saying the Southampton, Pa.-based company didn't have proper safety valves in place that could have lessened the severity of the leak and didn't have an alarm system to warn others of the leak.

A year later, DHEC fined Tanner more than \$90,000 for federal and state air and chemical safety violations, including using the wrong kind of hose — an assertion backed up by a National Transportation Safety Board investigation completed last year.

Werner faces a possible \$500,000 fine if convicted. Court records listed no attorney for the Gainesville, Ga.-based company, and a working telephone number could not be found.

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