6 Arrested in La. Explosives Investigation

JEFF AMY, Associated Press

The president and at least two other executives of a Louisiana explosives recycling company were among six people arrested Tuesday in the investigation of how the material was stored.

This photo provided by Ryan Meador shows an explosion at The Williams Companies Inc. plant in the Ascension Parish town of Geismar La., Thursday, June 13, 2013. The fire broke out Thursday morning at the plant, which the company's website says puts out about 1.3 billion pounds of ethylene and 90 million pounds of polymer grade propylene a year. **(AP Photo/Ryan Meador)**

The Explo Systems employees were indicted June 10 and allowed to turn themselves in. Each is free on $50,000 bond.

Each worker faces five felony charges — unlawful storage of explosives, reckless use of explosives, failure to obtain a magazine license, failure to properly mark

explosive material and failure to keep accurate inventory.

All those charges except the inventory count carry sentences of five to 10 years in prison and fines of $5,000 to $20,000. The inventory charge carries a prison sentence of two to five years and a fine of $1,500 to $10,000.

Explo Systems had a multimillion-dollar military contract to dismantle propelling charges used to fire artillery rounds. The company operated on space leased at Camp Minden, a Louisiana National Guard installation in northwest Louisiana. An explosion last October led authorities to look more closely at Explo and its facility.

An investigator discovered millions of pounds of an improperly stored propellant called M6, leading to the evacuation of nearby Doyline, the town known as the backdrop for the TV series "True Blood."

Among those arrested Tuesday were 65-year-old Explo Systems President David Fincher of Burns, Tenn.; 57-year-old vice president David Smith of Winchester, Ky.; and 67-year-old vice president of operations William Terry Wright of Bossier City, La. Also arrested were 54-year-old inventory control manager Lionel Koons and 50-year-old plant engineer Todd Dietrich, both of Haughton, La., and 43-year-old quality service manager Michael Kile of Bossier City.

In addition, the men face five counts of conspiracy, one related to each of the charges.

The company was indicted on the same charges.

Lyn Lawrence, a defense lawyer for Smith, said he hadn't seen the specifics of the indictment and declined further comment. Lawyers for Wright and Fincher said they would plead not guilty.

"We're going to fight the charges," said Ron Micotto, a Shreveport, La., lawyer representing Fincher. He said Fincher's defense would likely echo a lawsuit Explo filed against the Louisiana State Police. The suit contends the material is not within the proper jurisdiction of the state police and that M6 was not explosive in the way it was stored.

Louisiana State Police officials stripped Explo Systems of its explosives license on May 20, but the company won it back in state court in Baton Rouge earlier this month when state district court Judge Kay Bates signed a restraining order against the state police. A hearing in that case was postponed Monday.

Defense attorneys for Koons, Dietrich and Kile could not immediately be reached for comment. The men are likely to be arraigned on July 29, lawyers said.

Authorities said the M6 should have been stored in certified magazines, sometimes called bunkers, but some of it was found in boxes stacked in buildings, packed into long corridors that connect the buildings or "hidden" among trees outside. Some of the containers were spilling open, authorities said.

Authorities feared any ignition, such as lightning or a brush fire, could set off a massive chain reaction that would race through the corridors and blow up multiple buildings, threatening Doyline. Its 800 residents were put under a voluntary evacuation order for several days in December.

State police monitored the movement of the material, which took months as some of it was sold to other companies and the Guard provided additional space.

More 10 million pounds of the material was eventually stored properly and Explo relinquished its keys to the magazines at the installation. Also, state police said, about 100,000 pounds of flammable solid material and 130,000 pounds of Tritonal were moved to proper storage locations.

The Army gave Explo a $2.9 million annual contract in March 2010 to dismantle up to 450,000 propelling charges a year.

At some point, the company ran out of storage room and in early 2012 asked to lease more space at the installation, the Guard said. The company was turned down because it was about $400,000 behind on rent.

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Associated Press writer Holbrook Mohr contributed to this report.

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