Obama Orders Review of Chemical Plant Rules

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WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama is ordering federal agencies to review safety rules at chemical facilities in response to the deadly April explosion at a Texas fertilizer plant.

This April 18, 2013 file photo shows an aerial view of the remains of a fertilizer plant and an apartment complex to the left, destroyed by an explosion in West, Texas that killed as many as 15 people and injured more than 160. As a wave of new fertilizer plant construction and expansion is being proposed across the United States, this deadly explosion highlights how dangerous some of the chemicals used to make fertilizer can be, and how inconsistently they're regulated. **(AP Photo/Tony Gutierrez, File)**

Obama, in an executive order to be announced Thursday, specifically tasks agencies with examining new ways to safely store and secure ammonium nitrate, the explosive chemical investigators say caused the Texas blast. Agencies are also being told to determine whether additional chemicals should be covered by federal regulatory programs.

The massive explosion at the plant in the community of West, Texas, killed 15 people and leveled hundreds of structures, including three of the town's four schools. It also prompted new scrutiny of regulations at chemical plants and the risks posed by deadly chemicals to people living in surrounding areas.

While the explosion is still being investigated, preliminary findings have been presented to Congress. A report sent to the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee in June showed that the decades-old standards used to regulate fertilizer chemicals are far weaker than those used in other countries.

The report concluded that the safety of ammonium nitrate fertilizer storage "falls under a patchwork of U.S. regulatory standards and guidance — a patchwork that has many large holes." The Environmental Protection Agency, for example, does not regulate the chemical. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration requires ammonium nitrate to be stored separately from other combustibles in a room that

has a partition that can withstand fire for up to an hour. But the agency had not inspected the West plant since 1985.

Some agencies do have rules on ammonium nitrate, but none apparently applied to the facility in West.

While the investigation into the Texas blast is underway, the White House said it wanted to move forward where it could to address chemical safety concerns. Obama's executive order also calls for improved coordination among state and local agencies that deal with chemical plants . And it tasks the federal government with modernizing its information sharing about the plants.

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