

# Preventing Another West, Texas

NOMAAN MERCHANT, Associated Press

CLIFTON, Texas (AP) — When a fertilizer plant exploded in a small Texas town, killing 15 people and decimating homes and schools, it became Chris Connealy's responsibility to stop anything like it from happening again.

The state fire marshal has spent the last eight months studying the explosion in West of stores of ammonium nitrate, a common but potentially dangerous chemical used in fertilizer. Now, Connealy and his office are embarking on a 68-stop tour of Texas to meet with first responders and businesses about how best to store the chemical and deal with a fire like the one the night of April 17 at West Fertilizer Co.

Distrust of government runs deep in Texas, and the explosion did not spur serious calls from lawmakers for new regulations or a statewide fire code. Any change to how hazardous chemicals are stored here will likely have to come voluntarily, through attempts at persuasion such as Connealy's road trip.

The tour began this month in Clifton, a town of 3,400 that's about 35 miles from West. More than 100 people packed the auditorium for the presentation. Some of them had gone to West on the night of the blast to help evacuate and treat victims.

"Tonight I want to focus on reaffirming best practices," Connealy told the crowd. "I always say it's hard to get in trouble following best practices."

"The sole mission is to prevent another West," he added.

Connealy departed from his normally reserved public persona during the nearly two-hour talk, making jokes about his career as a firefighter and the high amount of testosterone found in the average firehouse. He acknowledged that he once questioned the need for training and orders from his bosses.

Both Connealy and Assistant State Fire Marshal Kelly Kistner would not specifically discuss the response in West, but stressed the importance of frequent training and officials asking for help if disaster ever struck. Connealy also called on fire chiefs to be ready to say a fire was too dangerous to fight — even if that went against firehouse culture.

"We have to make sure that our culture embraces safety," he said.

State and federal investigators have never identified a single cause or ruled out a criminal act in the West blast. But several deficiencies have come to light. Dozens of tons of ammonium nitrate were stored in flammable wooden containers. There was no sprinkler system and no fence around the property to keep out intruders.

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McLennan County, where West is located, has no fire code and it wasn't clear in the immediate aftermath what training West's volunteer firefighters had beforehand. At the time of the blast, state officials did not have an accurate tally of how many facilities in Texas stored large amounts of ammonium nitrate or how safe those facilities were.

Today, Texas officials say they have a better understanding of potential hazards, narrowing four separate databases to a list of 104 facilities with 5 tons or more of ammonium nitrate — about seven times less than the maximum amount believed to have detonated in West. A state website now lets users type in their ZIP code and see if there's a facility nearby, although the site doesn't post names of the facilities or map them.

Three of the facilities are in Bosque County, where Clifton is located. Connealy said those three were "better than many of the facilities that we've found across the state." Fire marshals' investigators found nothing wrong during voluntary inspections.

Like in West, where a well-known local family owned the fertilizer plant, the two facilities in downtown Clifton are operated by two brothers, John and Robert Payne, with decades of experience.

Robert Payne says he began working for his father as soon as he could walk. He now runs a business where he keeps ammonium nitrate inside a tall concrete silo once used for grain. On a recent afternoon, Payne showed a reporter about 7½ tons of ammonium nitrate — a pile of white powder about 3 feet high, secured behind a tarp-covered gate that was chained with a padlock.

Payne said he wasn't worried that the chemical was unsafe before or after the West explosion, saying he followed best practices already and had met with local volunteer firefighters afterward to discuss what to do in an emergency.

His main concern: Texas would overreact by rushing to pass new rules or laws that would drive up his costs and possibly push him out of business.

"I can see no way for anything to go wrong unless it was intentional," he said. "I don't see how a regulation would make anything any safer."

Bosque County may be one of the better-prepared parts of the state, as former President George W. Bush's ranch is in neighboring McLennan County and officials have had to think about what might happen in a major disaster for a decade.

"Our county is far more prepared for disasters than many, many rural counties," Bosque County emergency manager coordinator Dewey Ratliff said. Local officials also regularly communicate with firefighters and business leaders about potential hazards, from ammonium nitrate to fires to terrorism, Ratliff said.

Terry Boyle, president of the Clifton volunteer fire department, said after Connealy's

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meeting that he and other firefighters had thought about what they'd do if an ammonium nitrate disaster ever struck again. But ultimately, he said, there was only so much they could do to prepare.

"I have a feeling, if it happened to us, we'd have the same thing," Boyle said. "You don't know until you're dealing with it."

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