

U.S.

Evacuation Order Lifted Near Arkema Chemical Plant in Texas

Area evacuated six days ago after power was lost to cooling equipment at the French company's Crosby plant



The flooded plant of French chemical maker Arkema SA, which produces organic peroxides, after fires were reported at the facility in Crosby, Texas, on Aug. 31, 2017. PHOTO: ADREES LATIF/REUTERS

By Dan Molinski

Sept. 4, 2017 10:02 am ET

French chemical company Arkema SA on Monday told residents living near its plant outside Houston they can return home, six days after they evacuated before chemicals began exploding due to flooding from Tropical Storm Harvey.

“The 1.5-mile evacuation zone around the Arkema Inc. facility has been lifted and is no longer in effect,” the company said in a statement, indicating all remaining dangerous chemicals had burned off. “It is safe for residents to return to their homes.”

Arkema executives and local authorities last Tuesday began warning people near the plant in Crosby, Texas, 25 miles northeast of downtown Houston, to get out of the area. The company said the plant was sitting in six feet of water and electricity had been cut, rendering it unable to keep cool a large inventory of organic peroxides that were at risk of exploding in warm temperatures.

Sure enough, the chemicals housed in large trailers began igniting Thursday, one trailer after another over several days. In some cases, flames could be soon shooting several stories into the air, while billowing black smoke lasted for several hours after each event.

But when some trailers failed to catch fire on their own, and amid increasing pressure from residents and authorities to bring the situation to a close, the company on Sunday said it decided to purposely ignite the final inventories. It said would be using “proactive measures,” but didn’t specify how this was done.

A top executive apologized Friday for the crisis, saying information could have been provided more quickly. “I’d like to once more apologize to everyone impacted by the events at our site,” said Richard Rowe, head of Arkema’s North American subsidiary.

There were no reports of serious injuries from any of the blasts, though about a dozen Harris County Sheriff’s deputies were briefly taken to the hospital after breathing in smoke from the fires.

The plant produces a variety of organic peroxides under the product name Luperox.

Arkema is based in a suburb of Paris, France, and the peroxides at the Crosby plant are used to make things like pharmaceuticals, polystyrene cups, building material and acrylic-based paint.

Write to Dan Molinski at Dan.Molinski@wsj.com