

U.S.

New Fires Erupt at Arkema Plant Outside Houston

More fires had been expected at the facility after a container holding liquid organic peroxide exploded on Thursday



The flooded plant of French chemical maker Arkema in Crosby, Texas on Thursday. PHOTO: ADREES LATIF/REUTERS

By Melanie Evans and Christopher M. Matthews

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CROSBY, Texas—New fires broke out at a chemical plant in Texas on Friday, sending dark plumes of smoke into the sky hours after a top executive at the company that owns the facility apologized for the crisis.

Fire officials said that two trailers at the Arkema SA plant in Crosby, located about 25 miles northeast of downtown Houston, ignited Friday afternoon. No one was injured, the authorities said.

More fires had been expected at the facility after a container holding liquid organic peroxide caught fire and exploded early Thursday morning. Company executive Richard Rennard said after the first explosion that the company expects “eight other containers to do the same thing.”

One trailer ignited late Friday afternoon, and the heat from that blaze triggered a fire at another trailer about 20 feet away, Mr. Rennard said Friday night.

Bob Royall, assistant chief at the Harris County Fire Marshall's Office, described Friday's explosion as "a little more violent" than Thursday's because it involved two trailers instead of one.

Power loss and flooding after Hurricane Harvey led to a failure of refrigeration systems used to keep the peroxides cold at the plant. As these peroxides warm, they become unstable and ignite.

Company officials decided earlier in the week that it was too dangerous to get close to the Arkema facility, so they intended to let the organic peroxide burn.

Mr. Rennard said Friday night that the company's plan is to continue to wait for the remaining containers to ignite. He said he still expects the other six to burn. Those remaining containers are in a more remote location, he said.

Residents within a mile-and-a-half radius of the plant had been urged to leave their homes before the first explosion, which created a 30- to 40-foot plume of smoke that officials on Thursday described as "noxious."

The plant produces a variety of organic peroxides for the chemical industry under the product name Luperox. Arkema is part of a global chemical company based in a suburb of Paris, France, and its peroxides are used to make pharmaceuticals, polystyrene cups, building material and acrylic paint.

A top executive at Arkema apologized earlier Friday for the continuing crisis, saying the company could have released information more quickly.

"I'd like to once more apologize to everyone impacted by the events at our site," said Richard Rowe, chief executive of the company's North American subsidiary.

He said Arkema could have released information about the chemicals stored at the plant more quickly. But he said the company wouldn't divulge additional details about them, or about plans to address worst-case scenarios that Arkema has reported to the federal government.

He said he understood the public's need for information, but had to balance that with security concerns.

According to a 2014 report, the plant stores 66,260 pounds of anhydrous sulfur dioxide. Under a hypothetical worst-case scenario outlined in the report, the chemical, if released, could prove harmful for a radius of 23 miles, covering more than 1 million residents. The report was filed as part of a risk-management plan required by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Plants that store certain particularly toxic chemicals are required to file such reports every five years, and the 2014 report is the most recent for the Crosby facility.

Mr. Rowe said that sulfur dioxide stored on site, along with another chemical mentioned in the company risk-management plan filed with the EPA, remain secure based on aerial observation of the plant's storage tanks.

But Mr. Rowe said the company wouldn't release the EPA report. It isn't required to do so under federal regulations. The company posted the names of the chemicals it is required to report under a separate EPA regulation on its website Friday, but didn't provide additional details, such as the quantities and location of those chemicals at the plant.

"Our overriding concern...is to keep the public safe, I hope you know that," Mr. Rowe said.

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