

U.S.

Arkema Official Apologizes For Chemical Fire at Texas Plant

But worst-case scenario plans for volatile materials made unstable by Harvey remain unclear



A fire broke out at an Arkema SA chemical plant in Crosby, Texas, early Thursday morning. PHOTO: ADREES LATIF/REUTERS

By Christopher M. Matthews

Sept. 1, 2017 2:06 pm ET

A top executive at the chemical company that owns a plant where a container of volatile chemicals caught fire and exploded, apologized Friday for the continuing crisis, saying the company could have released information more quickly.

Flooding from Hurricane Harvey caused several cooling systems at the Arkema SA plant in Crosby, Texas, to fail. As chemicals called liquid organic peroxides stored at the facility warmed up, they became unstable and caused an explosion early Thursday morning.

Arkema said Friday it still cannot access the plant, located roughly 25 miles northeast of downtown Houston, and it expects eight other containers of organic peroxides to ignite in coming days. Nearby residents have been told not to return to their homes.

“I’d like to once more apologize to everyone impacted by the events at our site,” said Richard Rowe, chief executive of the Paris-based company’s North American subsidiary.

He acknowledged that 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.

"We need to keep the more detailed information...from those that would do us harm," Mr. Rowe said during a press conference Friday morning.

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 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 to 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 is not required to do so under federal regulation. 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.

Residents within a mile-and-a-half radius of the plant were told to leave their homes Tuesday before the explosion, which created a 30- to 40-foot plume of smoke that officials described as "noxious." The company has said it would monitor the air quality in the area.

Write to Christopher M. Matthews at christopher.matthews@wsj.com