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Reports: Little or no exit training for sugar workers

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Jul 09, 2009 (Savannah Morning News - [McClatchy](#)-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) -- IPSU | [Quote](#) | [Chart](#) | [News](#) | [PowerRating](#) -- Imperial Sugar Co. failed to show many workers at its local plant how to escape during a fire prior to a 2008 tragedy that killed 14 people and injured many more, federal interview reports indicate.

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At least 20 of the dead and injured in the Feb. 8 incident suffered severe burns.

Information on the lack of escape-route training came during interviews with workers conducted by the U.S. [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#) after the explosions and fire at the Port Wentworth refinery.

Sworn statements show company officials discussed evacuation issues three months before, but it's not clear what action they took.

Sonji Jacobs Dade, a spokeswoman for Imperial Sugar, said the company has no comment.

OSHA is seeking \$8.8 million in fines for alleged safety violations at Port Wentworth and at the company plant in Gramercy, La.

Imperial is appealing.

The agency interviewed more than 100 people, and The Savannah Morning News obtained copies of the interview reports. Most of the names were blacked out. Read copies of the testimonies.

[Lawyers](#) for victims of the disaster say the reports support their claim that the company neglected safety at the plant.

About 40 workers said no one at the company had shown them how to get out of the building if there was an emergency.

Only about 30 people said they were shown how to leave.

Others said they couldn't remember or didn't know, gave unclear answers, didn't answer or weren't asked.

"I was never trained on how to get out of the building," one employee said. "No one showed me where the exits were for any area."

Most workers said they had seen evacuation route signs, exit signs and emergency lighting. Some said they learned on their own how to leave.

Most said they were trained to use fire extinguishers. But some said they didn't get to practice using them and weren't sure they could.

Only five people recalled a fire drill at the plant.

Two workers said drills were held twice a month. But they may have been referring to twice-monthly drills that another worker said were held to practice how to use extinguishers, not how to leave the building.

One person said the last evacuation drill was two years ago; another couldn't remember when it was. A third worker said the last one was "four or five years ago."

In a statement to OSHA, Julius Scott, a packaging maintenance manager, said, "We have not had a fire drill in the last 4-5 years."

Former [corporate](#) safety manager Michael Lastie said in a sworn statement to OSHA lawyers that there "probably" were evacuation drills at the plant.

"But there... was not [documentation](#) of when they were done," Lastie said.

Most of those interviewed said they never had heard a fire alarm before the disaster.

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A few said they heard them when sprinklers were triggered; others said alarms were tested on Mondays or Tuesdays.

Still others said the main way to warn workers was a phone line linked to the plant public address system.

Lastie testified that radios were "the primary means" of alerting the company's first responder team.

Imperial President and CEO John Sheptor -- who was inside the plant on the night of the disaster -- testified the facility's radios and phones didn't work.

Sheptor said he later learned the radio tower was on a silo damaged in the blasts.

Deborah Haban, director of [human resource services](#), testified that company officials discussed alarms after a Nov. 2, 2007, explosion at the Domino Sugar plant in Baltimore.

Haban said then-[plant manager](#) Phil Rowland said workers might not be able to hear them over machinery noise.

Doug Sykes, another corporate safety manager who participated in the discussion, said the officials also talked about evacuation procedures.

"The discussions were not on deficiencies but a general discussion about ... looking into ... ensuring that employees knew exit routes and how to get out of the building," he said.

Sykes said no conclusions were reached about evacuations or alarms at Port Wentworth.

"It was just a, 'This is what we need to look at,' " he said.

In follow-up discussions, he said, managers agreed that workers would be notified by radios, phones and the PA system.

Haban said managers agreed to work on an "action plan" concerning those and other issues. But she added that she wasn't sure whether it was implemented before the disaster.

"Some of those dates for the action plan carried obviously past the Feb. 7th explosion date," she said.

Lastie also testified that the company lacked a document that "clearly spelled out... the roles and responsibilities of the first responder team."

"That was one of the recommendations that was made to them," Lastie said, referring to a 2004 safety evaluation.

"To the best of my recollection, there was not, you know, clear guidelines that was given," he said.

Lastie said he didn't know what the plant's procedure was for emergency evacuation.

Mark Tate, an [attorney](#) for the victims of the disaster, said the statements make it "clear beyond question" that Imperial's management was "willfully ignorant of common-sense safety measures."

"They wantonly destroyed lives, and the time has come for this company to pay the piper," Tate said.

Jeremy McKenzie, another plaintiff's lawyer, said, "the fact that a lot of people were not properly trained in evacuation probably exacerbated the injuries."

The worker statements partly contradict claims by a whistle-blower witness.

Graham Graham has testified that there was no evacuation plan or working fire alarm at Port Wentworth or at Gramercy when the local refinery blew up.

Graham, a former Imperial vice president, is a key witness in [lawsuits](#) against the company and the OSHA case.

His attorney, Philip Hilder, said Graham has no additional comment.

ON THE WEB

The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration talked with workers after the Feb. 7, 2008, incident at the Port Wentworth refinery. The statements deal with many issues, among them whether workers were shown how to leave the building in case of an emergency. Other related issues are whether there were fire drills, alarms, evacuation route signs, exit signs and emergency lighting before the disaster. Read copies of these testimonies at savannahnow.com/news/explosion.

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For full details on Imperial Sugar Company (IPSU) [click here](#). Imperial Sugar Company (IPSU) has Short Term PowerRatings of 6. Details on Imperial Sugar Company (IPSU) Short Term PowerRatings is available at [This Link](#).



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