

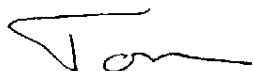
Interoffice
Communication

TO: Distribution

FROM: T. G. Grumbles
DATE: July 16, 1991
SUBJ: FORMOSA

TOG: ~~JOL~~ ~~EGJ~~ AC: ~~ADT~~ HF
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David Booth
VISTA

Some more publicity for our friends at Formosa.



T. G. Grumbles

dlj

Distribution: T. H. Huffman, R. Flammer, R. Smith, C. Matson

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\$25,000 fine hovering over plant

Formosa leak worries Point Comfort residents

BY STEPHANIE GLASS
OF THE HOUSTON POST STAFF

Tina Traylor Watkins spotted the thick, white cloud hovering over her Point Comfort property and called her parents, Dick and Sue.

Her father stepped out of his nearby home to check it out and a minute later he was on the phone calling Tina back, telling her to take her kids and leave.

Dick Traylor then videotaped what would later turn out to be a 7,500-pound cloud of hydrochloric acid that escaped from the Formosa Plastics plant across the highway when a valve broke at about 7:30 p.m. Sunday.

Then he called his two aunts, grabbed his wife and fled his home near the plant that sits about 120 miles southwest of Houston on Lavaca Bay. No one called to warn them until they were long gone.

"I was definitely scared," said Sue Traylor. "My eyes were burning. There was a strange taste in my mouth, bitter. I still have a metallic taste now."

It would later be called a complete communications breakdown in the community warning system that the Taiwan-based manufacturer was supposed to follow, and Formosa's alleged failure to act quickly and responsibly has one state agency recommending a \$25,000 fine.

If imposed, the fine would follow several million dollars in federal and state fines Formosa has received over the years for administrative and environmental violations in their Point Comfort plant.

Billy Zwerschke, the Calhoun County Emergency Management coordinator, said the first thing Formosa should have done was dial 911. They never did.

"A deputy in the city police department observed the cloud while he sat in his car at an intersection and called it in," Zwerschke said. "That was the first information we had."

Zwerschke's pager went off in the movie theatre. He dialed the sheriff's department and was briefed. He called the fire department from there and went to his office at

LEAK: Formosa plant faces \$25,000 EPA fine

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the courthouse. He called Formosa, where an employee told him what had leaked and where.

Zwerschke and other county officials started calling the handful of homes in the path of the cloud.

"We knew everyone in the vicinity of the area," Zwerschke said. "Most had already seen it and left."

In a news release Tuesday, Formosa officials claimed to have warned everyone immediately.

"The residents in the path of the release were phoned by the Formosa Plastics Security Department within five minutes of the release," the statement read.

In fact, the Traylor family left their home 20 minutes after noticing the cloud. The only warning message on the answering machine came 20 minutes after that,

at 8:10 p.m. It was not from Formosa. Tina was never warned.

The Traylor family did not hear from Formosa until more than 24 hours later, when company spokesman Joe Wyatt called Sue to see how she was.

Formosa also neglected to call the State Emergency Response Center in Austin, a division of the Texas Water Commission that handles dangerous chemicals are required to call as soon as they see a spill.

Not only did Formosa not call state officials, but Marilyn Querejazu, an emergency response coordinator, had to call Formosa.

"They should've reported it immediately. They did not call and it is serious," Querejazu said Tuesday. "It is a federal law and if violated, the state must ask by letter that the EPA (Environmental Pro-

tection Agency) pursue penalties."

"We're putting that letter together now and sending it to the legal division," she said.

After calling Formosa, Querejazu did her own investigating. She found a witness who said his eyes burned while sitting in his air-conditioned car 7 miles away. Another witness said the release lasted 33 minutes, twice what Formosa officials stated.

Formosa officials are promising a full inspection of the system with the failed valve and have promised to replace six other valves with a similar function.

They concede there were problems with the warning system.

"We did learn that there are procedures which we might adapt which might more fully protect the residents of this area," their statement read.

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