From the desk of

LARRY O'NEILL 9/20/95

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A Hard Look at Community Relations

Napp Accident Focuses Industry's Attention

If the chemical industry, its employees, and its neighbors have ever received a red alert, it happened in the early morning of April 21, when a mistake in mixing triggered an explosion of 1,000 lbs of aluminum powder at Napp Chemicals in Lodi, NJ. The explosion and the ensuing six-hour fire killed five workers and forced the evacuation of 400 Lodi residents.

The fire only exacerbated a shaky relationship between the chemical firm and Lodi, heightening community hostility toward industry. Mayor Philip Toronto, who had already been campaigning to rid the town of chemical manufacturing, vowed that Napp will never again manufacture in the town and is trying to chase other chemical manufacturers away.

The Napp explosion not only raised awareness in the local community but also reminded chemical employees everywhere just how dangerous chemical manufacturing can be. It also highlighted the importance of training among chemical companies and first responders.

New Jersey companies have found that community advisory panels (CAPs) provide a forum to discuss what went wrong at Napp and highlight efforts to keep such an incident from happening at their company. Environmentalists have used the accident to challenge recent relaxations in the state's right-to-know law as well as specific emergency response efforts by the state's chemical companies.

"Any time an incident of this magnitude happens, a realization of the potential of harm moves to the front of peoples' minds," says Gary Allen, regional chief with the state's emergency response bureau.

In an effort to avoid losing the trust of their communities, some New Jersey chemical operations talked about the Napp incident in their CAP meetings and presented the measures they take to prevent similar mishaps. John Schroeder, v.p. of Sybron, says his company chose to address the Napp accident at its monthly CAP meeting to mitigate some of the negative industry media coverage. "We gave all the information we had and then talked about it," he says. Sybron's concern dates back to an ethyl acrylate release at its plant in 1989.

Givaudan-Roure (Clifton), like Napp and other chemical companies in the state, is in a primarily residential area inside town limits. Harold Thompson, senior v.p./operations, says the company responded quickly to the Napp accident by taking CAP members on plant tours and discussing safety measures.

Huntsman Polypropylene, which has a joint CAP with industrial park neighbors



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ICI, Nalco, Lilly Industries, and Johnson Matthey, did not spend much time talking with its CAP about Napp. Plant manager Tom Bates says he feels "a certain level of comfort" between the industrial group and its Woodbury community members, because, he says, the company has spent a lot of time explaining "what we do to make sure not to create an incident in our neighborhood."



April 21: Napp's accident exacerbated a shaky relationship.

Jay McAndrews, president of Mona, says his company has been working on building good relations between it and the surrounding community of Paterson. "It seems the relationship between Napp and Lodi was not good even before the accident. We want to have a better, more open relationship with Paterson, and I think we are achieving it," McAndrews says.

Although several New Jersey chemical companies say they have strong relationships with their communities, local environmentalists say overall relations are lacking, especially in some small towns like Lodi, where companies are in residential areas and near schools.

According to Jane Nogaki, a board member of the New Jersey Environmental Federation and co-chair of the state Right-to-Know Coalition, small communities are apprehensive of chemical companies. She says the Napp incident enforced the notion that emergency response in chemical plants is "totally inadequate" and that industry attempts to hide or downplay the hazards associated with chemical manufacturing.

Environmental concerns in New Jersey also are using the Napp explosion to challenge Governor Whitman's slashing of over 2,000 chemicals from the hazardous substances list last year. That list, part of New Jersey's right-to-know legislation, requires industry to tell workers and state and local officials about what hazardous chemicals are used on the job.

Another issue with New Jersey chemical companies and public outreach and emergency response programs is that it has to be two-way. Some companies report that it is difficult to enlist the help of local governments and emergency personnel to help settle issues such as safety zones around plants and emergency evacuation procedures.

—JUDY STRINGER

RP Takes Emergency Response on the Road

RHÔNE-POULENC (RP) HAS taken its commitment to emergency response on the New Jersey roads. In a program called DART—Distribution Assistance Response Team—RP has established eight teams in North America, including one at RP's Cranbury, NJ facility. The team and a DART vehicle are on call 24 hours a day for any transportation emergency in the state and vicinity, including New York City airports and ports.

Bill Hubbs, head of RP's DART operations in North America, says the primary goal for the team is to integrate response actions with local site response teams in New Jersey. The North American DART communications center is located at Research Triangle Park, NC. Calls for the DART 800-number are fielded at that office.

The team members are RP employees who attend a one-week intensive training program at the Association of American Railroads training center in Pueblo, CO every year.

Hubbs says New Jersey is a key location for DART, not only because RP had operations in the state and a high volume of chemical imports and exports at New York ports but also because of the large distribution of highways and interstates in New Jersey. According to Hubbs, CMA tracked chemical transportation accidents and found New Jersey to be one of states with the greatest risk.



Covering the region from Cranbury—24 hours a day.

RP has had public open houses to discuss DART and ensures that all its warehouse and carriers know when and how to contact the team, although New Jersey DART leader Bill Rowe says there is not enough effort between the team and local New Jersey emergency response personal to coordinate procedure.

—JS

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