

The Seattle Times

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Four dead in Anacortes refinery explosion and fire

By Seattle Times staff and wire services

A fourth worker has died after an explosion and fire at an oil refinery in Anacortes shook homes and shot flames into the night sky early Friday. Three others are critically injured.

The fire struck the Tesoro refinery, about 70 miles north of Seattle, at about 12:30 a.m., the company said in a statement.

Three people died at the scene. They were Matthew C. Bowen, 31, of Arlington; Darrin J. Hoines, 43, of Ferndale; and Daniel J. Aldridge, 50, of Anacortes, according to Skagit County deputy coroner Bob Clark.

Four other victims were taken to Harborview Medical Center, where one of them â€” a 29-year-old woman whose name has not been released â€” died later Friday morning, according to a hospital official.

The same refinery was fined \$85,700 last year for safety violations discovered during an inspection by the state Department of Labor and Industries (L&I).

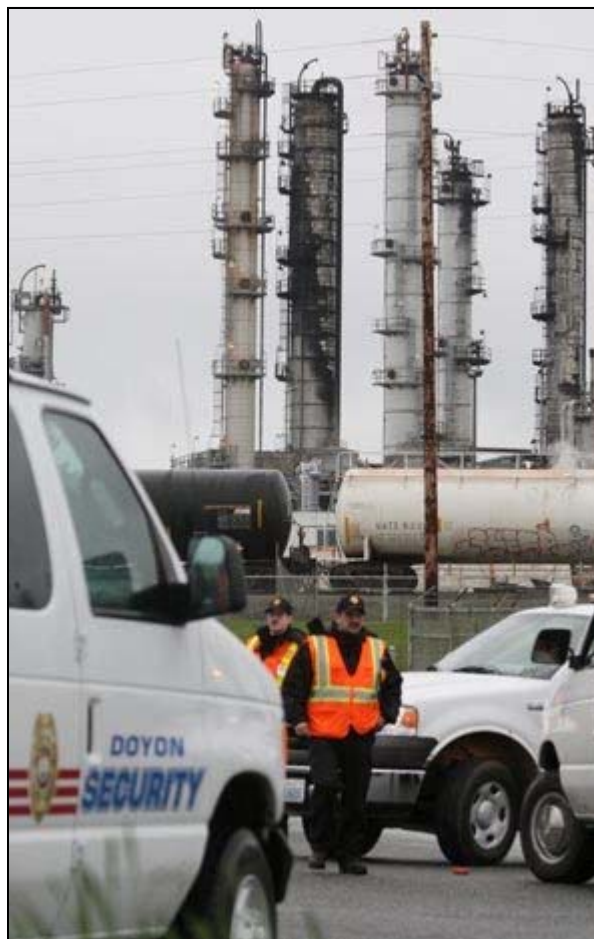
Tesoro was cited for 17 "serious" violations, meaning there was a risk of "death or serious physical injury" from each violation, according to L&I, which has investigators at the scene.

The blast occurred in the naphtha unit of the refinery. Naphtha is a volatile, flammable liquid derived during the refining process, and the unit had undergone maintenance and was in the process of returning to operation â€” a "typically dangerous" step of turning up heat and pressure, said Greg Wright, a Tesoro spokesman in San Antonio.

"It's a volatile process," Wright said. "We are diligent about being safe."

The fire was extinguished in about 90 minutes, the company said.

"It's a sad day but we know this can happen," said a 15-year employee of the neighboring Equilon refinery who asked that his name not be used. "We have a saying out there: We don't bake cookies, we boil oil. It can



KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

A charred tower is seen behind security outside a Tesoro refinery gate in Anacortes after Friday morning's explosion.

be dangerous."

Three employees injured in Friday's explosion are still hospitalized with major burns over the majority of their bodies. Susan Gregg-Hanson, a spokeswoman for Harborview Medical Center in Seattle, said they are a 36-year-old woman and two men, 34 and 41.

Nearby residents, some five miles from the complex, called TV stations after midnight with reports of an explosion, saying flames were being blown by high winds.

Lisa Wooding lives about a mile away on March Point Road, where she can see the refinery from her window.

She was lying on her sofa Thursday night when she saw a red glow against her neighbor's house. When she went to the window, her whole house shook with the explosion.

"There were big flames coming out and black smoke and it looked like ambers over the refinery," Wooding said. "Then the emergency sirens started going off."

She said she never felt in any danger "but I'm more concerned about the workers. I've lived here all my life. My dad does construction work for the refineries and it's a small town."

Michael Curran said he was sitting in the den of his house when he felt what sounded like a large sonic boom. At first he thought it was an exercise by Navy jets, then he heard the sirens.

"I went to the window and saw a big plume of smoke and knew something had happened at the refinery," he said. "The flames grew higher and higher, but I didn't hear any other explosions."

He could see people wandering down to the waterfront to watch the fire.

Among them was Einar Sortun, harbor keeper at the Fidalgo Marina across Fidalgo Bay from the refinery. About 12:30 a.m., he heard sirens and went to the office of another marina, where people gathered, several of whom said they felt the explosion.

"It's scary," he said. "You're kind of always looking over your shoulder with [the refinery] there."



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CLIFF DESPEAUX

The front gate of the Tesoro refinery in Anacortes, Wash. after a fire early Friday morning, April 2, 2010. Three people were killed and four others injured in the explosion and fire.

He said he worries about explosions, air pollution, even the possibility of the refinery as a terrorist target.

Janet Almand, who lives about a mile from the refinery, said the explosion rocked her bed and woke her. "I'm in a wheelchair so I didn't want to get up," she said. "I pray for those poor people at the burn center." She said she has a friend who works in maintenance at the refinery and worries about him.

Don Munks, 62, a lifelong resident of Anacortes and current Skagit County assessor, owns a cattle ranch immediately south of the refinery.

He was sleeping at 1:30 a.m. when he received a phone call from someone at the refinery, saying there had been a fire and people were injured, but he didn't need to evacuate.

"This is going to be tough," he said. "Anacortes is such a close, tight-knit community. It's going to be tough to pick up the pieces for the people in this town."

David Yoder, owner of Brown Lantern Alehouse in downtown Anacortes, said the community is "just on pins and needles" waiting to hear the names of the victims.

"It's going to be horrible," he said "This is such a small town that if you don't know one of them, your neighbor will. The town grieves hard."

Tesoro human-resources manager John McDarment said he didn't know exactly how the fire started.

"This is a very sad time for our organization. Everyone in the Tesoro family appreciates the impact that this will have on the families involved, and we are responding quickly to ensure the safety for our employees, contractors and the neighboring community," said Bruce Smith, Tesoro's chairman, president and CEO.

"Right now we're all pretty much in shock," said Joe Solomon, president of United Steel Workers, Local 12-591, which represents about 200 Tesoro refinery workers. "Any time one of our members is injured or a fatality is involved it hits all of us really hard."

Activity around the complex had calmed down considerably as dawn approached. Guards were turning reporters away from the gate and there was no apparent sign of the fire that had lit up the skies only hours earlier.

A team of about four investigators from the U.S. Chemical Safety Board, the federal agency charged with investigating chemical accidents, is expected to arrive in Anacortes Saturday, said Daniel Horowitz, a spokesman for the agency.

"We take this accident extremely seriously," Horowitz said.

The Environmental Protection Agency's Seattle office is sending a seven-member response team to the Anacortes site to investigate the incident, said Calvin Terada, the team leader.

Terada said the team, which includes two contractors with technical expertise, will examine what caused the incident and whether there was a release of flammable gas or a hazardous substance.

The team also will determine whether petroleum products were properly stored and what management practices and principles were in place to assure community safety at the time of the incident, Terada said.

The examination also will include whether Tesoro was under any obligation to notify the community of a

hazardous-substance release, including emergency responders, Terada said.

Terada said it would be typical to look at whether any civil or criminal environmental laws were violated, but he would neither confirm nor deny that investigators from the EPA's criminal-investigation division were sent to the scene.

The United Steelworkers union, which represents workers at the Anacortes refinery, also has sent an emergency-response team there, including at least one investigator and others to help grieving families, said Lynne Baker, a national spokesman for the union.

Gov. Chris Gregoire issued a statement Friday morning: "My thoughts and prayers this morning are with the loved ones of those killed in the tragic refinery fire overnight in Anacortes. The loss is tremendous and painful ... I also pray for those critically injured."

U.S. Sen. Patty Murray also issued a statement that said, in part: "There is a lot that is still unknown about the causes of this heartbreaking accident, but as we learn more we need to work together to make sure that we are doing everything we can to protect our workers and prevent tragedies like this from happening again."

San Antonio-based Tesoro is an independent refiner and marketer of petroleum products. The Anacortes refinery, located about 70 miles north of Seattle on Puget Sound, can refine about 120,000 barrels of crude daily, primarily into gasoline, jet fuel and diesel for markets in Washington and Oregon, according to the company.

On its Web site, Tesoro states that through its subsidiaries, it operates seven refineries in the western United States with a combined capacity of approximately 665,000 barrels per day.

The site also says Tesoro's retail-marketing system includes more than 880 branded retail stations, of which over 380 are company operated under the Tesoro, Shell, Mirastar and USA Gasoline brands

In November 1998, six men were killed after an explosion and fire ripped through another Anacortes refinery, the Equilon Puget Sound Refining Co.

In 2001, a \$45 million settlement, which was believed at the time to be the largest of its kind in state history, was reached on behalf of the victims.

In the settlement, Equilon admitted responsibility for the accident, saying there had been lapses in safety that contributed to the explosion.

Events that led to that explosion began two days before the blast when a windstorm knocked out power to the refinery, forcing a total plant shutdown. That meant normal sources of steam were not available to purge pipes, and meant workers could not use it to cool down the coker's interior, which regularly reached more than 900 degrees Fahrenheit.

When workers were finally given the order to unseal the coker drum, an undetected pocket of hot gases ignited on contact with the outside oxygen, triggering a huge explosion.

Seattle Times staff reporters Jim Brunner, Steve Miletich, Susan Gilmore, Jack Broom, Hal Bernton, Craig Welch and Sara Jean Green, and The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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