



U.S. Chemical Safety and
Hazard Investigation Board

News Release – June 22, 2005

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CSB Reports Chemical Dust Explosions are “Serious Problem;” Nearly 200 Accidents took 100 Lives; Data, Testimony Noted at Public Hearing Today

Washington, DC, June 22, 2005 – Carolyn Merritt, Chairman of the U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB) declared chemical dust explosions in the United States are a “serious industrial safety problem” in opening a day-long hearing into the hazards of such accidents. Chairman Merritt noted the CSB’s preliminary research reveals that nearly 200 dust fires and explosions have occurred in U.S. industrial facilities over the past 25 years, resulting in approximately 100 fatalities and 600 injuries.

“Dust explosions are preventable,” she said at the hearing, convened by the CSB as part of an ongoing investigation into the causes and prevention of dust explosions, like the tragedies in Kinston, North Carolina (West Pharmaceutical Services), Corbin, Kentucky (CTA Acoustics), and Huntington, Indiana (Hayes Lemmerz), in 2003. A total of 14 people were killed and 81 injured in these three accidents. Information on the accidents can be found at www.csb.gov.

Chairman Merritt said, “Dust explosions often cause serious loss of life and terrible economic consequences. While some programs to mitigate dust hazards exist at the state and local levels, there is no comprehensive federal program that addresses this problem.” Ms. Merritt said the agency wants to find out more information about the scope of the dust problem. “After the study is complete, we will be better able to recommend measures to help avoid dust explosions and fires like those at West, CTA, and Hayes Lemmerz,” she said.

At the hearing, CSB lead dust study investigator Angela Blair and investigator Giby Joseph presented preliminary data indicating there have been 197 dust explosion incidents in the United States since 1980, causing 109 fatalities and 592 injuries. The explosions, which occur when fine particles of dust are ignited, occur in many industries, the CSB found, including rubber and plastic products, chemical manufacturing, primary metal, lumber and wood products, and food products, among others. They occur nationwide. For example, the CSB preliminary data show 21 such incidents in Illinois over the years, 19 in California, 13 in Ohio, 8 in North Carolina and three in Kentucky.

Ms. Blair said the primary purpose of the hearing was to gather information from experts on what changes are needed to reduce the occurrence of these accidents. “This information will aid our investigation and result in recommendations that ultimately will save lives and prevent large economic and job losses.” Ms. Blair told the gathering, “Dust

(more, over)

explosions cause significant damage, serious and often fatal burn injuries, as well as job losses and sharp economic impact in communities.”

Over 20 experts in various fields were scheduled to participate on several panels at the day-long meeting, including the noted Professor Rolf Eckhoff of the University of Bergen, Norway, the author of several authoritative books on dust explosions. He and other panelists were to address a variety of topics, including the impact on society of dust fires and explosions, the status and effectiveness of relevant state fire codes, voluntary prevention programs, and technical barriers to prevention and protection.

Scheduled panelists included Al Mitchell and Chris Noles from the Kentucky and North Carolina offices of the State Fire Marshal, respectively, who planned to discuss efforts to implement fire prevention codes and to educate local fire marshals about dust hazards. Michael Wright, health and safety director for the United Steelworkers of America, was to discuss the human impact of dust explosions on workers.

Panelists also included representatives of the North Carolina Department of Labor - Occupational Safety and Health Division, the National Fire Protection Association, the International Code Council, the Aluminum Association, and safety experts from manufacturing companies and other trade associations.

A public comment period also was scheduled at the hearing, held at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center in Washington, DC.

The CSB is an independent federal agency charged with investigating industrial chemical accidents. The agency’s board members are appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. CSB investigations look into all aspects of chemical accidents, including physical causes such as equipment failure as well as inadequacies in safety management systems. The Board does not issue citations or fines but does make safety recommendations to plants, industry organizations, labor groups, and regulatory agencies such as OSHA and EPA. Further information about the CSB is available from www.csb.gov.

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