1 Dead, 3 Hurt in Miss. Fish Plant Explosion

Associated Press

MOSS POINT, Miss. (AP) — One person was killed and three others were injured in an explosion Monday at a fish processing plant on the Mississippi coast.

Omega Protein spokesman Ben Landry said it happened about 9:30 a.m. while employees of a subcontractor were working on two storage tanks and one of the tanks blew up.

Jackson County Coroner Vicki Broadus identified the dead worker as Jerry Lee Taylor II, 25, of Mobile, Alabama. Broadus said an autopsy will be conducted.

Injured were Josh Walls, 34, of Escatawpa; Clay Davis, 40; and Lloyd McGill of Gautier. All three were taken to Singing River Hospital in Pascagoula. Davis and McGill were treated for minor injuries and released. Walls underwent surgery and was listed in fair condition Monday afternoon.

McGill's fiancee, Stephanie McElroy, said McGill was welding at the time of the explosion.

"Him and another guy were at the bottom of the tank welding the tank on the outside and when he looked over to his left, he actually saw the tank lift off the platform," she said.

She said Walls, who is her cousin, and Taylor were atop the tank and were knocked off.

Landry said Houston-based Omega Protein expects to reopen by the end of the week.

"The Moss Point facility did not suffer any significant damage or loss of product inventory as a result of the incident, but the plant will not be operating until the conclusion of the on-site investigation," Landry said in a statement. "Omega Protein is working cooperatively with local officials as we aid in gathering details about today's events."

Moss Point Fire Chief Tommy Posey told reporters at the scene there was no fire after the explosion.

Omega Protein operates a menhaden — or pogy — fishing fleet with a processing plant and adjacent shipyard in Moss Point.

The publicly held company produces fish oils and fish meal for human consumption and use in aquaculture, agriculture and industrial applications. The plant and its adjacent shipyard employ about 300 people, with employment peaking during

Menhaden fishing season from mid-April until early November. The company has processing plants in four states.

Posey said the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration is expected to begin an investigation Tuesday.

The Moss Point plant has had some safety issues in the past. In April, the OSHA fined the Moss Point plant $3,341 over violations of sanitation rules and failure to provide proper machine protection.

In 2012, an Omega Protein worker was killed in an accident that federal investigators have since said was avoidable. Christopher Hebert, 24, of Moss Point, had worked at the plant for three years. He was killed when caught in a rotating screw conveyor.

OSHA initially cited Omega for 25 violations after the fatality. That was reduced to 22 violations and a fine of $50,000. Omega was cited for multiple issues, including failure to make sure machinery was properly locked down when it was being worked on and failure to properly secure floor and wall openings. Hebert's family is suing.

In May 2011, three men were killed aboard an Omega Protein fishing boat called the Sandy Point, which collided with a 660-foot container ship in the Gulfport ship channel.

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