

Safety tips list when handling fertilizer

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Friday, 03 May 2013 14:03 -



All Points Cooperative no longer handles volatile ammonia nitrate.

When handling or storing fertilizer, anything can happen.

The fertilizer storage facility that blew up April 18 in West, TX, is a retailer like All Points Cooperative in Gothenburg.

Retailers sell to growers and don't manufacture products, according to All Points vice president of agronomy Mark Ballmer.

What officials speculate may have caused the explosion is the fertilizer ammonia nitrate, Ballmer said.

When combined with heat, carbon and water, he said the product can become explosive,

For the explosion to have occurred, Ballmer said conditions had to be perfect.

"You'd have to have every star and moon lined up," he said.

All Points handled ammonia nitrate in the late 1970s but the fertilizer was replaced by urea which had a higher nitrogen content which is more plant food per ton, he said.

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“Urea is also a more stable product,” Ballmer said.

Following the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, OK, that killed 168 people, he said ammonia nitrate became highly regulated.

Ammonia nitrate was the key product in the bomb manufactured by Timothy McVay and Terry Nichols.

Today, Ballmer said anhydrous ammonia is the product handled by All Points that is watched and regulated the most.

“Anhydrous is a liquid stored under pressure that is classified as a non-flammable gas,” he explained.

The chemical can cause severe burns if it comes into contact with skin, Ballmer said, and the fumes can be difficult to handle.

It has such natural attraction to water that it just takes your breath away, he said.

Because of the potential of anhydrous ammonia to burn, water containers have been placed on each trailer that transports the fertilizer to farms. Containers full of water are also kept on site at the facility in case of an emergency.

In addition to mandatory year-round training for fertilizer and chemical handlers at All Points, Ballmer said personnel from the state fire marshal’s office inspect the facility at least once a year to make sure fertilizer is handled, stored and transported safely.

Ballmer noted that the fertilizer product business has changed much in the past several years.

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“Liquid and dry fertilizers are more commonly used than anhydrous today mainly due to farming practice changes in tillage,” he said.

In reference to the West, TX, plant explosion, Ballmer—who also serves the community as fire chief—said the fire fighters killed in the blast were working to protect their community.

“They gave the ultimate sacrifice,” he said.

Ballmer added that All Points has and will continue to be a safe business partner in the community.

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