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Local News

Explosion Kills Two in Milwaukie

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By AMY PALANUK and ABE ESTIMADA, kgw.com Staff

Investigators are trying to determine what caused a pressurized tank inside a Milwaukie business to explode on Monday morning, killing two workers and shaking windows and ceilings at neighboring companies for blocks around.

The bodies of the male workers were removed from the building later that afternoon after a hazardous materials team determined it was safe for rescuers to enter the premises.

Their ages were approximately 39 and 50 years old, said Jamie Karn a spokesman for Clackamas County Fire Department.

The blast happened inside the H2O Technologies suite on 4011 SE International Way at about 7:50 a.m. Monday. The company researches and manufactures pressurized tanks used in water filtration systems for farm use.

The force of the explosion, which fire officials believe may have been the equivalent of two or three sticks of dynamite, killed both men instantly and forced the evacuation of H2O Technologies and two adjacent businesses that share the 10,000-sq. foot building on International Way.

An initial sweep by two members of the Gresham Fire Department's hazardous materials team revealed no major release of chemicals from the blast, said battalion chief Mark Maunder.

H2O Technologies stored corrosive acids, oxygen and hydrogen in tanks near the explosion. No other tanks were ruptured.

"We do not believe any large amounts of chemicals...were released," Maunder said.

Police cordoned off a block-wide area around the building in the light-industrial district of Milwaukie as investigators sifted the ruins for



Hazardous Materials crews prepare to enter the building. (KGW Photo)



Fire crews from Clackamas County, Portland and

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clues.

Gresham responded to the explosion. (KGW Photo)

Investigators are trying to determine what exactly the two men were doing when the 60-gallon tank exploded inside a research laboratory-warehouse area.

Investigators initially believe the men were attempting to separate hydrogen and oxygen from a tank filled with water. It's possible that too much hydrogen inside the pressurized tank ignited, causing the explosion, said Karn.

"But until the haz-mat team goes in to see what the real cause is, we don't know," said Henle.

The tank that exploded is believed to be the only one in the building used for separating hydrogen and oxygen from water. The technology, which allows farmers to feed farm animals oxygen-enriched water, has been around for the last four or five years, said Bill Henle, hazardous materials coordinator for the Portland Fire Bureau.

Hydrogen and oxygen are common industrial gases, Henle said. Under some circumstances, they can become very dangerous. A balloon full of hydrogen can sound like a high-explosive M80 when ignited, Henle said.

The explosion, which occurred about 7:50 a.m. Monday, could be heard from at least two blocks away.

Donna Lindell was sitting at her desk in at the Summit Brokerage suite in the same building when the explosion rocked the ceilings and rattled the windows around her.

Lindell and other employees could see smoke billowing from H2O. She ran inside to help while a half-dozen other witnesses dialed 9-1-1 for help.



The H2O Technologies plant in Milwaukie. (KGW Photo)

Lindell and an uninjured worker inside the building found one man lying on the ground with debris strewn around him. He was motionless.

"He was just down, badly hurt," she said.

Part of the ceiling had collapsed, beams were scattered, torn wires hung freely and the sprinkler system showered water everywhere.

The other worker walked around and found another body lying on the floor, Lindell said. He, too, could not be helped.

The odor from the accident was putrid, scratching the back of her throat, said Lindell.

A light dust hung suspended in the air around her.

"The odor was just piercing," she said.

The smell of destruction sent Lindell and the worker fleeing from the scene.

"We thought, 'We'd better get



out of there in case there was (kgw.com Graphic)
another explosion," she said.

Minutes later, fire officials responded to the 9-1-1 calls.

Henle and other firefighters from Gresham and Portland were helping investigate the fire. Officials from Oregon's Occupational Safety and Health Administration were also on scene.

OSHA investigators will be looking carefully at where dangerous chemicals were placed during the explosion, what the workers were doing and what kind of safety training they had, said Kevin Weeks, a spokesman for the Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services.

H2O Technologies is an international company based in Ontario, Canada. Its research facilities are based in Milwaukie, according to the company Web site.

It doesn't appear that H2O Technologies has been cited for safety violations by OSHA, said Peter De Luca, administrator for the Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services.

"We haven't been on this site as far I know," De Luca said.

OSHA has six months to investigate the cause of the explosion, he said.



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