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Explosions being studied

By JERRY ALLEGOOD, Staff Writer

One year after a deadly blast rocked Kinston's West Pharmaceutical Services plant, federal investigators have launched a national survey of dust explosions in an effort to protect workers.

Six people died and dozens were injured last Jan. 29 when dust from the plant's rubber-making process ignited.

Stephen Salk, the U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board's lead investigator on the Kinston incident, said Wednesday that laboratory tests will examine whether a hot surface or spark could have ignited the dust. He said investigators are also evaluating the causes of other fires and explosions in the rubber-making industry to see whether there is any similarity.

The board had said possible sources of the West explosion included static electricity, machinery, a tool or smoking. Although the board does not issue citations or fines, it makes recommendations to industry and government.

Donald E. Morel Jr., West's president, said Wednesday that the company addressed concerns about dust by reviewing facilities and preventing dust accumulation. The company's planned new Kinston plant will be designed differently than the one that exploded, he said.

The company, which makes synthetic parts for medical equipment, was forced to close the heavily damaged plant near the Kinston Regional Jetport. It plans to relocate to a shell building on U.S. 70 several miles away.

The company paid a \$100,000 fine and donated \$300,000 to emergency response agencies as part of a settlement with the state Department of Labor, which also investigated the incident. **The state determined that the company exposed employees to dangers by allowing dust to accumulate, by having unapproved equipment in certain areas and by failing to advise workers of hazards.**

The company also faces lawsuits from employees and area residents. In one complaint in Craven County Superior Court, about 130 plaintiffs contend they suffered property damage and were exposed to hazardous materials in the incident.

As the official fallout continues, company officials and employees will mark the anniversary today. About 250 people were expected to attend a ceremony at 1 p.m. at Immanuel Baptist Church in Kinston.

The church, near the plant, was a haven and gathering place after the explosion shattered the winter afternoon. Initially, there were rumors that an airplane had crashed or that the plant had been attacked by terrorists.

Kinston Mayor Johnnie Mosley said Wednesday that he saw the ominous cloud of black smoke billowing over the town a year ago as he rushed home from Goldsboro. "It was a real sad feeling," he said.

The explosion prompted citizens to pull together, he said. "We look at it as a tragedy that has turned out many positive attributes," he said.

Morel said the company decided to remain in Kinston because of its link to the community and the dedication of the employees, many of whom had worked there more than 20 years. "Folks were very loyal," he said.

It would have taken the company longer to rebuild from scratch, he said. The new operation should

be running by October.

The original plant employed about 255 people, but the new plant will have fewer, 150 to 200, because it will not have rubber mixing facilities. Morel said the company has not decided what it will do with the old site.

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