

£1.2m fine for chemical company after explosion

A chemicals company has been fined £1.2m following an explosion at its site at West Thurrock.

Only two people suffered minor injuries following the blast, which happened during the operation of the hydrochloric acid (HCl) burner on 26 September 2013.

Chelmsford Crown Court heard that the newly installed HCl burner being used by Industrial Chemicals Limited had only been used a handful of times when the explosion occurred. The plant site had been under construction for several months and was undergoing commissioning.

Two workers were injured; one suffered a grazed knee from a breeze block dislodged from the wall of the control room and the other a minor caustic burn caused by a drip from the plant in the minutes following the explosion.

The explosion effectively destroyed a tank and displaced a scrubber column upwards and at an angle. An investigation by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), acting as part of the COMAH competent authority, found that in an attempt to address risks from chlorine, the company routed the vent gas containing mostly hydrogen through to the plant emergency scrubber where it was able to come into contact with oxygen or chlorine which found an ignition source and then exploded.

Industrial Chemicals Limited of Stoneness Road, West Thurrock pleaded guilty to breaching Regulation 4 of the Control of Major Accident Hazards Regulations 1999, was fined £1.2 million and ordered to pay costs of £35,854.

Speaking after the hearing HSE inspector said: "The investigation has shown that the potential for an explosive atmosphere had not been identified during the design, construction or commissioning of the plant. This incident could have been avoided if simple checks had been carried out.

"Duty holders should be aware that HSE will not hesitate to take appropriate enforcement action against those that fall below the require standard."

A COMAH Prohibition Notice was served following this incident.

Notes to Editors:

1. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is Britain's national regulator for workplace health and safety. It aims to reduce work-related death, injury and ill health. It does so through research, information and advice, promoting training; new or revised regulations and codes of practice, and working with local authority partners by inspection, investigation and enforcement. www.hse.gov.uk
2. More about the legislation referred to in this case can be found at:

www.legislation.gov.uk

3. HSE news releases are available at <http://press.hse.gov.uk>
4. Under the Control of Major Accidents Hazards (COMAH), HSE works as part of the Competent Authority. Visit www.hse.gov.uk/COMAH for further information.

Journalists should approach HSE press office with any queries on regional press releases.