

3 people killed in 2 Texas natural gas explosions

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Laurie Whatley, left, area manager of DCP Midstream, and Doug Loman, construction specialist, look at the gas line after a dozer struck the pipeline Tuesday causing an explosion near Darrouzett, Texas. Two people were killed and three others were injured during the explosion. AP photo/Michael Norris, Amarillo Globe, News

By BETSY BLANEY • Associated Press Writer LUBBOCK, Texas — An explosion in the Texas Panhandle that killed two men was the second deadly blast in the state in two days involving workers who have accidentally hit natural gas lines.

The blast Tuesday involved a crew that was removing caliche — commonly used in cement — from a pit for a dirt-contracting company, Lipscomb County Sheriff James Robertson said in a news release. The explosion happened when a bulldozer struck a pipeline in a remote area of the Texas Panhandle a few miles east of Booker, Texas, and just a few miles from the Oklahoma border.

A day earlier, one worker was killed when a utility crew accidentally hit and ruptured a natural gas line in rural Johnson County, about 50 miles southwest of Dallas. Fred Haag, chief operating officer of Oklahoma-based C&H Power Line Construction Services, said that particular crew followed the proper procedures in locating the line before digging. The crew was drilling a hole for an 80- to 120-foot utility pole when the gas line was struck and ruptured,

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sending a massive fireball into the air that burned out about two hours later after the gas flow was shut off.

Haag said the crew already had a survey map showing gas lines in the area but also made calls to verify the line location.

Robertson declined to identify the employer of the men killed Tuesday. He did not release the men's names because relatives had not been notified.

Denver-based DCP Midstream shut off valves leading to the 14-inch pipeline, allowing the fire to burn out about four hours later, spokeswoman Roz Elliott said. She said the pipeline fed one of the company's processing plants.

Three other workers were injured in the Panhandle explosion. One was hospitalized in Oklahoma City in critical condition but was expected to survive. Two others escaped with injuries that were not considered life-threatening.

Rhonda Cochran said she could see the flames as she was driving from Booker to her home in Darrouzett.

"They were huge," she told the Amarillo Globe-News. "I was eight miles away from Darrouzett. You could see the flames."

Authorities identified the man killed in Monday's blast as James Robert Neese, 45, of Ramona, Okla. His body was found about 600 feet from the explosion site.

"James was a beloved, hardworking father who always put his family first," his wife, Lavonne Neese, said in a written statement.

At least seven of the other 13 workers who had been close to the site were treated at hospitals, mostly for burns to their necks and arms as they ran away from the massive fireball, Haag said.

Several of Neese's relatives also work for C&H, including his brother who was at the site Monday but was not injured. Neese, who has several children and stepchildren, recently welcomed a new baby with his wife, Haag said.

"It's hard because we're a fairly small company and close-knit," Haag said. "His crew was like a family to him, and he watched them like a mother hen."

After investigators finish looking over the site, workers will repair the ruptured pipeline, which is expected to take several days, said Houston-based Enterprise Products Partners LP, which partially owns the 36-inch-diameter line. It is a 395-mile segment of a pipeline extending from western to eastern Texas, the company said.

Associated Press Writer Angela K. Brown in Cleburne contributed to this report.

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