



# Is the industry getting safer?

It doesn't seem that way after a recent spate of accidents

Nearly 30 dead from recent blasts and fires," reads the headline on pg 18 of this issue. It's an article that gives us cause to pause and assess. Is the chemical industry really getting safer, or is it poised for a downward spiral that will injure employees, damage our communities and add another layer of tarnish to an already besmirched public image?

Fatal accidents in Allentown, Avon, Anacortes, Bryceland and Ossea point to the conclusion that the industry is falling far short of continuous improvement in this important area.

Factors contributing to the decline include some of the underpinnings of improved corporate profitability in recent years, such as downsizing and team-based decision making.

Downsizing has brought on a "brain drain" that leaves the industry with a less skilled workforce. The rise of team-based decision making has empowered employees but sometimes puts nonexperts in critical roles.

So, what's happening to reverse the trend? Well, it just happens that the Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB) is coming onto the scene. I recently sat down with Dr. Paul L. Hill, CSB chairman and CEO, and later met with CSB chief investigator Robert Brant.

## CSB emerges

The CSB mission is to "seek ways to prevent accidents." The agency was authorized in the 1990 Clean Air Act but wasn't formed until January 1998. The CSB is currently investigating or reviewing 26 incidents that have killed 55 people in 17 states.

CSB's objective is to identify the root causes of incidents. The board intends to write a draft report within 60 days of each investigation and submit a final report (and hold a hearing if appropriate) within six months. Their reports are posted on the Internet at [HYPERLINK http://www.chemsafety.gov](http://www.chemsafety.gov).

Feedback has been favorable on their first two reports, covering disasters at the Sierra Chemical Plant near Reno, NV, and Union Carbide's Taft facility in Hahnville, LA.

Before the CSB came along, safety monitoring of chemicals had been spread across 14 federal agencies with no one organization exercising oversight responsibility. Congress created the CSB to give a single entity that job.

In defining CSB's scope the only exception was for marine-related spills, which will remain the responsibility of the Coast Guard. OSHA and EPA remain involved, but CSB is charged with oversight and determining causes.

Twenty-six people are working at CSB today, including the four board members. One seat on the board is vacant. The CSB expects to grow to 60 people next year, and then level off in the third year with about 100 staff members and a \$16 million to \$18 million annual budget.

## Measuring safety

Meanwhile, the CSB is grappling with ways of measuring safety.

Certainly a baseline would be useful for benchmarking progress. And CSB will soon be armed with two large databases of accident history. The first is the 600K Database, compiled from information gathered by five of the federal agencies that have been involved with chemical industry safety. (At least half of the incidents relate to transportation.) The second is the EPA's new risk management program (RMP) five-year accident database (see pg 24).

Converting those two databases from information to knowledge, and from knowledge to practical tools, is the challenge.

## What can you do?

Asked what people in the plants can do to improve safety, CSB's Brant said: "The plant people really have to be strong; it's their safety! Don't check your brain at the gate. You need to participate and speak up when something is wrong!"

Brant also pointed to the importance of putting effective management systems in place. The first two CSB investigations revealed significant flaws in management systems.

Paul Renner, associate director of the nonprofit Labor Institute, has proposed a five-part safety index based on SARA Title III releases, plant emergency response records for fires and explosions, OSHA 200 logs (including those of contractors), number of employees in plant and number of hours worked per year.

Renner suggested that companies "tie compensation of management into these indices."

"What you measure," Renner adds, "is what you pay attention to, and what you pay attention to is what you fix."



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