



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on April 18, 2013

Fertilizer Plant Explosion Devastates Texas Town

At approximately 7:50 pm on April 17, a [massive explosion at the West Fertilizer Co.](#) plant in the small town of West, Texas, left an estimated five to 15 people dead, injured at least 160 others, and destroyed many buildings in the surrounding vicinity. A 50-unit apartment complex near the plant was reduced to reduced to “a skeleton,” a state police officer was quoted by AP.



In a process reminiscent of rescue workers combing through the rubble after the collapse of the World Trade Center in 2001, rescue workers could not immediately tell if they were engaged in a search-and-rescue or body recovery operation.

“They have not gotten to the point of no return where they don’t think that there’s anybody still alive,” Waco Police Sgt. William Patrick Swanton said of the rescuers.

Because of the small size of the West Police and Fire Departments, many public statements were issued by members of the Waco Police Department. West, with a population of about 2,800 people, is located about 18 miles north of Waco. Members of the Dallas Fire-Rescue team, coming 70 miles from the north, were also seen taking part in the rescue effort.

“We’ve got a lot of people who are hurt, and there’s a lot of people, I’m sure, who aren’t gonna be here tomorrow,” said West Mayor Tommy Muska. “We’re gonna search for everybody. We’re gonna make sure everybody’s accounted for. That’s the most important thing right now.”

Dallas Radio WBAP interviewed D.L. Wilson with the Texas Department of Public Safety, who described what he saw when he arrived on scene: “Massive [damage]. Just like Iraq, just like the Murrah building in Oklahoma City. The same kind of chemical exploded. You can imagine what kind of damage we’re looking at.”

Members of West’s volunteer fire department responded to a call reporting a fire at the plant at 7:29 p.m., Swanton told reporters. Because the plant houses a very large chemical stockpile, “they realized the seriousness of what they had,” he said.

Mayor Muska, who is also a volunteer firefighter, said that he and his fellow emergency workers were in the process of evacuating the area around the plant when the blast followed about 20 minutes later.

The owners of the plant, Adair Grain Incorporated, reportedly held 54,000 pounds of anhydrous ammonia, which, along with nitric acid, is used to produce ammonium nitrate fertilizer, at the plant.

As an indication of the explosive power of this substance, the bombs used in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing were made from 5,000 pounds of ammonium nitrate fertilizer, mixed with liquid nitromethane and an explosive called Tovex. The U.S. Geological Survey reported that the blast at the fertilizer plant caused a seismic event measuring 2.1 on the Richter scale.



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The impact of the explosion was so great that Sarah Lefever, this writer's daughter, who lives about 40 miles northwest of West, in Cleburne, heard the sound at her house:

Justin [her husband] and I were in different rooms of the house, with the windows open. I heard what sounded like a distant "BOOM" and thought maybe it was thunder since we were expecting storms later that night. Shortly after that, the reports of the plant explosion in West started coming in and I asked my husband if he had heard the same sounds I did earlier and he said that he thought it had been thunder, also.

[Sergeant Swanton said](#) there is no indication that the West explosion was anything other than an industrial accident. However, agents from the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) were on the scene investigating the explosion. The Bureau announced on the morning of April 18 that it would be sending a national response team of fire investigators, certified explosives specialists, chemists, canines, and forensic specialists. ATF teams delayed entering the scene of the blast until the site cooled down, however. "It's still too hot to get in there," Franceska Perot, an ATF spokesperson, was quoted by AP.

[ABC News Blogs](#) posted a quote from Acting Special Agent in Charge of ATF Houston Field Division Crisanto Perez on Thursday afternoon:

This has been a week of loss and tragedy for the nation. ATF is committed to working alongside state and local law enforcement by bringing its expertise to determine the origin and cause of this horrific incident. ATF will provide whatever resources necessary to thoroughly investigate and provide answers.

The ATF involvement, though apparently standard procedure in the case of all large fires and explosions and not considered to be an indication of foul play, is one of several coincidences related to this tragic event. The 51-day siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco by the ATF ended on April 19, 1993, when an exchange of gunfire resulted in the deaths of six Davidians and four ATF agents. A follow-up investigation discovered the bodies of 76 people, including 20 children, inside the compound. The Branch Davidian compound was located just 25.9 miles from the West Fertilizer Co. plant.

Tomorrow is the 20th anniversary of that incident, as well as the 18th anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing.

As noted, however, there is no reason to believe that any of these coincidences are anything more than just that.

The [New York Times](#) reported that Special Agent Erik Vasys, a spokesman for the FBI in San Antonio, said on Thursday morning there has been no indication of criminal activity in the plant explosion, but that the FBI has personnel on-scene to assist local officials if needed.

Coming so soon after the horrible bomb explosions at the Boston Marathon on April 15, the West plant explosion added more sorrow to a nation already grieving. True to form, Americans nationwide extended their support to the victims of both tragedies. The creator of a Facebook page called "Pray for Boston" added a photo montage to the page captioned: "Pray for West, Texas." The morning host of the Dallas talk radio station WBAP interviewed a representative from the Red Cross on this morning's program, telling the many people who have offered to donate blood how to go about it.

Fox 4 News in Dallas set up a special [Facebook page](#) with links to the Dallas Red Cross, where posters could share information about places where donations of blood, bottled water, clothing, blankets, and



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other necessities would be collected. One woman posted on the page:

The citizens of Texas all have a small town mentality and if it happens to one of us it happens to all of us. We need ... as a huge family... to come together and help in any way we can. God bless West, Tx and God bless Texas.

Photo of remains of West Fertilizer Co. smoldering in West, Texas: AP Images



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