Lax Oversight a Factor in Deadly Blast

Federal investigators have determined that a lack of oversight and regulations at the local, state and federal levels contributed to the deadly fertilizer plant explosion that devastated a rural Texas town last year.

Fertilizer explosion

Five days after the anniversary of the explosion in the town of West, one of the worst industrial accidents in the state’s history, the United States Chemical Safety Board released the preliminary
findings of its investigation at a news conference here on Tuesday. Officials with the agency highlighted a series of shortcomings, both in how the West Fertilizer Company handled the agricultural chemical that touched off the explosion — ammonium nitrate — and in how various agencies oversaw the company's operations and storage of the chemical.

White pellets of ammonium nitrate, a fertilizer sold to farmers in the area, were stored in a wooden warehouse in wooden bins, inside a building without a sprinkler system. No federal regulations exist preventing a company from storing the chemical in such a way. The volunteer firefighters who rushed to the plant to fight a fire that broke out there before the explosion were largely unaware of the dangers of ammonium nitrate, and a local emergency planning committee had not adopted an emergency response plan for the plant. Even if they had, Texas has no statewide fire code that would have established a minimum set of standards.

Ammonium nitrate is stored at more than 1,300 facilities around the country, but there are no zoning regulations at any level of government to prevent such plants from being located near residential areas, officials said Tuesday. Other countries have more rigorous standards covering both the storage of the chemical and the proximity to other buildings.

"Lax Oversight Cited as Factor in Deadly Blast at Texas Plant" New York Times, April 22, 2014