

Five dead in Colorado hydroelectric plant fire

By Naomi Spencer
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Five workers were killed Tuesday afternoon in a chemical fire at a Clear Creek County hydroelectric plant west of Denver, Colorado. The fire trapped the men in the middle of an empty, 4,000-foot-long water tunnel about 2,000 feet underground. Four other workers escaped the blaze and were taken to regional hospitals for chemical inhalation.

The tunnel, or penstock, connects a reservoir to turbines at the Cabin Creek pumped storage facility owned by Xcel Energy corporation. The work crew was coating the inside of the penstock with an anti-corrosion epoxy sealant when their sprayer equipment caught on fire, according to a spokesperson for Xcel Energy.

The company said that after the fire broke out, the five workers ran uphill to a water lock at a juncture of the pipe, past which the tunnel angles steeply upward. The four surviving workers were below the fire and were able to escape out the bottom of the penstock.

Xcel issued two initial press statements on October 2 indicating that the five trapped workers had retreated to a safe distance up the pipe from the fire, and that they had been in radio communication with rescuers at least half an hour after the fire started at around 2 p.m.

A timeline of the rescue efforts reads like so many concerted but failed attempts to save trapped miners in the past few years.

Shortly after 2:30 p.m., rescuers dropped air masks and oxygen tanks down the 50-foot vertical shaft at the penstock's end. The workers were not able to reach the emergency equipment, according to officials, because they were separated from it by a 1,000-foot segment too steep for passage.

At 4 p.m., an hour-and-a-half after the workers' last communication, rescuers attempted to enter the tunnel from the bottom but reported only 15 feet of visibility because of smoke.

At 5:40 p.m., the Henderson Mine Rescue Crew

entered the tunnel's bottom opening while two other groups from the Urban Search-and-Rescue Team and the Alpine Team attempted to rappel down through the tunnel end but aborted after determining it would be easier to reach the men from the other end.

The Henderson team, working at the bottom, determined at around 6:30 p.m. that the fire had burned itself out, four and a half hours after it had started. Rescuers reported finding the bodies of the trapped workers shortly after 8 p.m..

While the rescue efforts were a heroic mobilization of the numerous local and state disaster response agencies, it is clear is that Xcel Energy Inc.—a Fortune 500 company with annual revenues upwards of \$9.2 billion—had no serious emergency plan in place for the workers it put into remote, hard to access, and confined areas with limited ventilation.

“It's the worst thing that's ever happened here,” Clear Creek County emergency management director Kathleen Gaubatz told the *New York Times*. “We've never had anything happen like this before. This is incredibly disappointing.”

As of this writing, the dead workers have not been identified, and none of the names have been released. According to local news reports the men died of asphyxiation. Bakersfield, California-based television station Fox58 reported that four of the five killed were residents of Bakersfield.

The nine workers were contracted laborers. On Tuesday, Xcel refused to release the name of the contractors' employer. According to a report published Wednesday morning in the *Denver Post*, “An Xcel spokesman said the safety of the men was the contractor's responsibility.” Tom Henley, the spokesman, told the *Post*, “They are experts in the field, and that's why we hired them.”

It was later reported that those killed had been employees of Robison Prezioso Inc. Coating of Santa

Fe Springs, California. A statement from RPI Coating said the men were all experienced and well-equipped. "The men were all wearing breathing apparatus," the company's sales and marketing director told the *Post*.

The paper noted, however, that the victims were wearing Tyvek suits and paper masks, but did not have self-contained breathing devices or air supplies while they worked. Tyvek is a synthetic material used to protect from stains and liquids, but does not provide protection from hazardous materials or fire.

Clear Creek County, Colorado Under-sheriff Stu Nay said the workers merely wore painting suits, which were not fire-retardant, and particle masks. He said there was no sign of firefighting or other safety equipment.

There were other aspects of safety neglected on the site. "You've got to keep all of your atmospheric conditions under control," Jeff Szalkowski, a long-time worker specializing in applying industrial coatings told the *Denver Post*. "You have to keep an air supply moving through the pipe, with both negative and positive air pressure fans. They also should have had gas-monitoring detectors with them."

Colorado's Occupational Safety and Health Administration director, Herb Gibson, told local NBC affiliate Channel 9 that his agency had not received any safety complaints about either the Cabin Creek hydroelectric plant or RPI Coating. Gibson acknowledged that OSHA has not conducted any inspections at those two sites within the last decade.

Later Wednesday, however, Gibson told the *Denver Post* that RPI Coating has "a significant OSHA history... We are taking a look at their history." In fact, in the past decade, the company was fined \$64,000 for dozens of safety violations.

OSHA fined RPI Coating \$44,550 and issued five citations in 2002 after one worker was crushed to death and four other workers were injured in a scaffolding collapse while painting California's Bay Bridge. A year earlier, the father of the worker who was killed, also an RPI Coating employee, was injured after an 80-foot fall while working on the same project. Also in 2001, a motorist was killed when RPI Coating scaffolding weighing nearly three tons fell onto his truck as he passed by.

Among worker complaints against the company was excessive lead exposure and lead poisoning. The

Chronicle reported that in October 2000, an Coating employee working on the Bay Bridge had one of the highest lead poisoning levels ever reported in California.

Between 1990 and 2001, the company was cited for 60 violations and issued \$200,000 in proposed fines, according to a 2002 report by the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

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