

Director's Corner



I am sure 2013 is another year of hope and progress in all areas of our respective endeavors. In the case of Mary Kay O'Connor Process Safety Center and Texas A&M University, we are going through a change in realignment and reorganization. In keeping with these changes, we are also changing our Center logo to get aligned and consistent with the system logo.

I am sure many of you have developed a connection and recognition with the earlier logo we had been using for the last 16 years and look back on it with nostalgic feelings. But changes in logo and branding are sometimes needed in order to align organizations and bring uniformity. Regardless, I want to assure you that the Mary Kay O'Connor Process Safety Center goals and vision remain the same, and we will tirelessly continue on our journey to help improve process safety in the industry through our extensive programs in education, research and service. A branch of the Center has already been established and is operational in Doha, Qatar. Negotiations are under way to establish such extensions and branches of the Center at a few other locations. The approach is very simple. At these extensions and branches, we will establish the same programs and activities that have brought great successes at the College Station campus of Texas A&M University.

Effective June 1, 2013, the Mary Kay O'Connor Process Safety Center logo is:



**MARY KAY O'CONNOR
PROCESS SAFETY CENTER**
TEXAS A&M ENGINEERING EXPERIMENT STATION

I also want to take this opportunity to say a few words about the West, Texas, ammonium nitrate incident. We are devastated by the incident and our heart goes out to the victims, their families and the town in general. However, the incident should give us reason for pause and reflection. The hazards of ammonium nitrate are very well known starting from the Texas City tragedy in 1947 to the incident in Toulouse, France, and the terrorist attack of the Alfred Murrah Federal building in Oklahoma City. The questions that come to mind include:

- 1) How many facilities like West are there in Texas?
- 2) How many facilities like West are there in the U.S.?
- 3) How can regulatory oversight of worksites such as the West plant be improved using existing regulations and programs?
- 4) Are there any existing regulations and regulatory bodies in Texas specifically that deserve the most attention in the wake of this disaster?
- 5) Based on all the ammonium nitrate incidents that have happened in the past, would it be correct to say that the largest group among the casualties tends to be first responders?
- 6) What lessons have been learned in past fires involving ammonium nitrate and which of those lessons may be relevant again here?
- 7) Did West have zoning considerations or land-use planning considerations when allowing all other development to run snug up against the fence line of a depot storing such huge quantities of explosive materials?

- 8) Since 10 of the 14 people who died were killed while fighting the fire, were there any mistakes in how first responders handled the emergency?
- 9) What fire-fighting measures were used in past incidents involving ammonium nitrate? More importantly, can we say definitively what is the best way to fight an ammonium nitrate incident?
- 10) Is there a concrete way for us to determine how much water should have been available at the West site (measured by fire hydrants or capacity)?
- 11) Is there variation in how different states or localities dictate how much water should be available on site for locations that store or handle large amounts of flammable or explosive material?
- 12) How would third-party auditing work in situations like this? And incrementally how much would it cost the facility?
- 13) Is there a need for new regulations? Why, where and how could they be enforced?
- 14) Is there an effective way for industry themselves to come up with some way to improve the situation?

As we deal with the aftermath of the West incident and hopefully investigation reports reveal the root causes, we at the Mary Kay O'Connor Process Safety Center will continue to explore these broader questions and report back to you in our future communications. In the meantime, let's hope and pray that the lives lost in West, Texas, were not in vain and the lessons learned from the incident and the investigation reports lead to safer storage, handling and usage of ammonium nitrate and other hazardous materials. 

M. Sam Mannan
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