Devastation Continues for Families Near Poisonous Gas Leak

"Like something out of a horror movie."

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SEMINOLE, TX

Nearly two months after an oil well blowout about 4 miles east of Seminole, some residents said the oil company has not addressed their concerns properly.

Dozens of families were displaced when the well blew out on December 8, 2015. Gaines County emergency response teams were on scene for at least a week.

Hydrogen sulfide, or H2S, was released in the blowout. The potentially deadly gas made contact with many homes, forcing evacuations within a 2-mile radius.

"Heard a loud explosion, and directly following the loud explosion the house was shaking violently," said resident Kenneth Hawkins. He and his family got into his car and left before the gas engulfed their home of 10 years.

"[We] took off as quickly as we could to get out of the way," he said.

The oil company, Tabula Rasa Energy, provided funds for temporary hotel housing, and laundry. The Red Cross stepped in to assist with meals and supplies.

One week later, on December 15, Hawkins, with his wife, Heather, and dozens of other residents, were allowed through a checkpoint to go back home.

RESIDENTS RETURN TO HOMES A WEEK AFTER OIL WELL BLOWOUT

Displaced Gaines County Residents Will Be Allowed to Return Home Tuesday Following Well Blowout

Displaced Seminole Residents Frustrated But Thankful

Hundreds of Residents Displaced After Oil Well Blowout

Gaines Co. Sheriff Confirms Well Blowout Near Seminole
"Because we were on ground zero, they had to have our house checked with monitors. They had a guy go in... and he came out and declared the house uninhabitable for human life."

The Hawkins' home was cleared for re-entry the following week.

"Public safety is our responsibility," said Gaines County Judge Tom Keyes. "Once we had people out of the danger zone, out of the potential plume, really then it fell on the Red Cross and the oil company."

"We facilitated what we could with that, but really that wasn't what we were responsible for," he explained.

"Everyone was back in their homes in 3 or 4 days," said Tabula Rasa Chief Executive Officer Tracy Evans. "We're working on putting [the well] back in service."

Evans said an insurance adjuster had visited the blowout location, but Hawkins claims his home has not been looked at. Evans said he had not gotten a progress report on the insurance process as of Tuesday.

Wednesday afternoon, just over two months after the gas leak, Hawkins said he was contacted by an insurance adjuster and made an appointment for Saturday.

Hawkins said even two months later, his home is uninhabitable.

"My family is having to live in a house that I know without question is unsafe. We're trying to hurry up and get out of there in fact and move into a new home, but that's a process," he said.

He added that his wife's health has declined since the potentially deadly H₂S gas leak.

"My wife's asthma has increased ten-fold. She's had to be going to the doctor about it constantly in order to get ahold to it," he said.

"It's also quite poisonous at high concentrations," said Todd Anderson, Professor and Chair of Environmental Toxicology at The Institute of Environmental and Human Health at Texas Tech. "At certain concentrations it deadens the olfactory nerve and so the person doesn't necessarily realize they're being exposed. They continue to be exposed because they can't smell it anymore after the first couple of inhalations."

"High enough concentrations can certainly be harmful," Anderson added. "There are safety factors that are sort of built in to some of the regulations to try and protect people. Those little monitors that folks carry that alarm, alarms are set at ten or fifteen parts per million because they don't want people breathing in H₂S long term."

"Disgusted, sicken, angry, outraged," was how Hawkins felt about his entire situation.

"What I would like to do, is get what was taken from me and my family, and we'd be good with that."

"[Tabula Rasa has] reimbursed the county for the overtime that our employees put in," Keyes said. "They've been very responsible in their response to us."

Hawkins said he hasn't seen a dime.

"They'll tell us 'We'll get to you as quick as we can,' and still no response. There has been very few people that have gotten anything out of this. I don't think anybody has actually gotten paid for the losses as of yet," he said.

"I don't know that we can ever promise that we'll never have something like this again," Keyes said. "It's the nature of where we live. But what we can do, and what we are doing, is making sure that our emergency response teams are trained up and ready. And and that's the most important thing you can do."

Hawkins' family has been his driving force to continue sticking up for his community.

"That gives you the strength to move forward to the next day. And once you have that strength, you fight the next day when the next day gets here."