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Experts: Smoke from Waxahachie fire may be threat, despite early discounting of toxic risk

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Early results from air monitoring around Monday's chemical plant fire in Waxahachie showed no elevated levels of toxic chemicals in the thick, black smoke, the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) said.

Other experts, however, still warned of potential hazards as the fire continued to smolder.

Details of what happened were sketchy, but experts said the smoke plume from a Magnablend Inc. plant appeared to come from an oil-based substance and not just from the industrial chemicals reportedly at the facility.

An explosion of unknown origin just before 11 a.m. triggered a fire at the plant, at 1601 W. U.S. Highway 287.

Experts were able to pinpoint the dangers that typically surround a chemical fire accompanied by large volumes of dark smoke.

Kuruville John, a chemical engineer and air-quality specialist at the [University of North Texas](#) in Denton, said any such fire would produce high amounts of soot and carbon, which can cause breathing problems.

Other hazards are possible, based on what materials are burning, John said.

The [Ellis County](#) company makes a range of chemicals for oil and gas producers, including some used in hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, of new gas wells. It also serves other industries.

Crews from the EPA and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality set up air-monitoring equipment on the ground. The EPA also flew a plane equipped with pollution monitors through the smoke plume several times but did not detect elevated levels of toxic chemicals, the EPA said.

Local officials ordered evacuations around the plant because the chemicals reportedly at the facility are highly hazardous and because any smoke is harmful, regardless of what it contains.

TCEQ spokeswoman Lisa Wheeler said Magnablend uses ammonia and sulfuric, hydrochloric, nitric and phosphoric acids to blend chemicals.

The chemicals are toxic, corrosive and strong irritants that can burn even when not on fire. Inhaling or

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ingesting them or absorbing them through the skin can be fatal in high doses, but there were no indications Monday of how much was in the air.

Magnablend's website said its products for the oilfield industry include chemicals used in fracking new oil and gas wells.

Companies force water, chemicals and other materials underground at extremely high pressure to fracture shale formations and release trapped gas.

The company also blends chemicals for agriculture and other industries. Texas and federal officials said the company did not have a history of environmental violations.

John said TV video of the fire and smoke suggested that more was burning than just the chemicals. The amount and appearance of the smoke pointed to building materials, plastics and possibly other flammable substances from nearby storage tanks and rail cars, he said.

Tracking by the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) showed that the smoke was lofting to a high altitude, meaning it could remain in the North Texas [atmosphere](#) for days, John said.

Readings in urban North Texas did not show elevated levels of particulate matter, largely soot, in the air, John said.

[Texas Tech University](#) toxicologist Ronald J. Kendall agreed that more sources than the chemicals reportedly at the plant were involved in the fire.

He said the smoke appeared to come from a burning petroleum substance and warned that such fires create highly toxic polyaromatic hydrocarbons.

"I would particularly be concerned about PAHs," Kendall said. "Combustion of hydraulic fluids and other oil-based substances, which to a large part is creating the dark black smoke from the large fire in Waxahachie, could also be liberating toxic chemicals into the air."

Kendall said anyone near the plant should take precautions, closing up houses and cars, protecting pets and other animals and possibly leaving the area.

"Great care should be implemented to avoid breathing the smoke," he said.

Magnablend filed a required risk-management plan with the EPA in 2009 that covers emergency planning and contains details of high-hazard chemicals onsite.

However, there were questions Monday about whether the company had filed a risk-management plan for the facility that burned. The address on the plan in EPA files is 100 W. Sterrett Road in Waxahachie, a different location.

EPA spokesman David Bary confirmed the discrepancy between the addresses. The EPA was checking to resolve the question.

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