

Commission: Explosion's cause not yet determined

AUSTIN (AP) — A deadly explosion near Brenham may have resulted from a salt dome storage facility being overfilled with natural gas liquids and leaking, but other possibilities haven't been ruled out, the Texas Railroad Commission said Thursday.

"This is only one possible explanation," based on preliminary test results, Commission Chair Lena Guerrero told a news conference.

She emphasized, "The investigation is continuing. We cannot say for sure at this time what the cause of this accident was."

The commission hopes to complete its work within 45 days, she said.

The April 7 blast killed three people, injured 18 others and caused at least \$6.6 million in property damage.

Railroad Commission spokesmen told The (Brenham) Banner-Press on Wednesday they had made a preliminary finding that Seminole Pipeline Co.'s storage facility was overfilled, and that a check valve failed, resulting in a release of liquified petroleum gas product from the cavern that touched off the fiery explosion.

"We want to ensure that no false impressions have been left by statements made," Guerrero said.

The commission's investigation first focused on an above-ground pipeline loop and valve that remained on fire for days after the explosion, Guerrero said.

The loop is in an area where two, 6-inch pipelines join, one owned by Seminole and one by Coastline Gas Pipeline Co.

The commission as yet has found no evidence to indicate a drop in pressure, a leak, or a malfunction in either of those pipelines before the explosion, Guerrero said.

The commission also has no data on any damage to a 14-inch Seminole pipeline that runs near the storage cavern, she said.



Human fly

Vanessa Armenteros, a freshman education major from Houston, flings herself onto the "velcro wall" with the help of a trampoline outside the MSC Thursday afternoon.

ORTRUN GINGERICH/The Battalion

Experts question theory of oil's origin

Researcher says unlimited supply exists

By Karen Praslicka
The Battalion

Texas A&M petroleum experts are skeptical, but if Thomas Gold can prove his latest theory, the world's energy problem could be over.

The Dallas Morning News reported Sunday that Gold has found proof that oil and gas are of non-biological — or abiotic — origin.

Gold, a former professor of astronomy at Cornell University, has said that all oil and gas on the planet was trapped in the Earth 4.5 billion years ago during the big bang, and there is an unlimited supply for the world to use if it can be extracted, he said.

Gold's theory has not been well accepted since he first proposed it about ten years ago. But during the past few years he has gained attention after claiming he has found oil where there should not have been any.

Gold has persuaded the Swedish government and United States investors to drill a well in the Siljan Ring area of Sweden, the Morning News reported. The ring is the site of a meteor crash 350 million years ago, and is made of granite.

Since the drilling began, Gold has found oil — the problem is, no one is convinced the oil came from non-organic rock.

The A&M Geochemical and Environmental Research Group (GERG) has analyzed Gold's research, but found no conclusive results.

Dr. Mahlon Kennicutt, a senior research scientist with GERG, said the actual drilling process could have created what Gold has found.

There were some hydrocarbon gases found during the drilling in addition to the oil, which would add to Gold's theory, but the drilling bit on the rock can produce these same kinds of gases, Kennicutt said.

"Tommy Gold makes lots of claims, but the consensus is it hasn't been a successful experiment," he said. "They have produced some fluids that appear to be due to other things."

An additive — usually an oil-based mud — is pumped into the hole during the drilling process to control pressure or lubricate the drill bit if it gets stuck, which con-

taminates the hole. The search concluded that the oil pumped into the hole was Gold and his team discovered.

"There was nothing pumped by the hole that wasn't pumped it," Kennicutt said.

Dr. Stephen Holditch, professor in the Texas Petroleum Engineering Department, said that Gold's theory might not be as controversial as it seems.

"As with lots of scientific problems, the truth is somewhere in between," he said. "But there is strong evidence that lots of hydrocarbons are from source rocks."

"Gold's theory is strictly theory now, but I don't think it has proved or disproved it."

Holditch said Gold and his search team probably should have used oil during the drilling process since they were looking for oil or gas.

Holditch said, however, that Gold claims to have extracted tons of oil that Gold claims is not that much. There are seven barrels per ton, so the tons recovered by Gold and his team is less than 100 barrels.

The capacity of the hole to pump out the oil might be 100 barrels, which is an insignificant amount that could come from the drilling process, Holditch said.

Kennicutt said there could be some abiotic formation of petroleum, but there is also evidence for its biological formation.

One piece of evidence involves the formation of oil in the ground's subsurface.

"Through drilling and exploration efforts, we've found oil comes more prevalent in the surface the deeper you go, and the temperature gets hotter," Kennicutt said.

Through studies involving depth, the conversion of organic matter into petroleum because of the increasing heat can be observed, he said.

The second piece of evidence involved laboratory experiments using sedimentary rocks. The sediments were heated in the lab and they produced an oil-like substance. This supports the piece of evidence concerning the formation of oil, Kennicutt said.

The third piece of evidence

Texans collected \$247,000 as informants for IRS

AUSTIN (AP) — If you missed this week's Internal Revenue Service filing deadline, don't let too many people know. They could turn you in — and turn a profit.

Forty-six Texans took advantage of the snitcher's reward and collected a total of \$247,000 last year.

Call it a finder's fee considering the IRS collected \$7.4 million from those who were turned in.

Of course, the IRS has a kinder word for snitches — informants.

"Informants are often citizens who see their neighbors with a boat or a couple of expensive

cars and suspect that they aren't paying what they owe," said Jackie Antweiler, a public affairs officer for the IRS in Austin.

In the business world, companies have been known to turn in their competitors and employees have even ratted on their tax-dodging bosses.

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