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LA: Natural Gas Rig Explodes; At Least Seven Workers Injured

10/16/17 / Liz Carey (news_author.php?author_id=)

Kenner, LA (WorkersCompensation.com) – An explosion on a natural gas drilling platform in Lake Pontchartrain near New Orleans has sent seven workers to the hospital and left authorities questioning whether one worker is missing.

The explosion happened on the evening of Sunday, Oct. 15. Residents in the area told local news media that it sounded like a sonic boom.

Officials said that at least five of the seven injured were critically wounded and the other two suffered minor injuries. The search is still on for a man presumed to be missing, authorities said.

East Jefferson General Hospital Emergency Director Mike Gilliard said in a live press conference that the two workers with minor injuries were released over night, but that two of the critically injured workers had been admitted to the burn unit in critical condition, and that another had been admitted to the Intensive Care Unit.

Jefferson Parrish Sheriff Joe Lopinto said a search and rescue operation was underway with boats and helicopters searching the lake. The missing person's family had not been notified as of Monday morning, and the sheriff refused to release his identity until all of the family was notified.

Lopinto said in a live press conference that the explosion centered around a natural gas line. The line had been shut off, but the fire would be allowed to burn out, per procedure.

"From what we understood, there was cleaning with some type of chemicals on the platform, but obviously the victims of this fire are in the hospital right now," Lopinto said in a press conference. "We can leave those interviews 'til another day."

Lopinto said that he didn't have the exact number of people that were on the oil rig, but that he believed there were some people who were on a supply boat that escaped injury during the blast. Lopinto did not identify the owner of the rig.

But, Lopinto said this is "not a Deepwater Horizon." Authorities said they will allow the fire to burn itself out and that the explosion poses no environmental threat.

The Jefferson Parrish Sherriff's Office didn't respond to requests for comment by press time, and the Fire Department's public information office referred all calls to Fire Chief Dave Tibbets who was onsite at the Williams Boat Landing on Lake Pontchartrain. An email to the fire chief was not immediately answered.

According to Ryan Zehl, with Zehl & Associates, the number of platform explosions in Louisiana is on the rise. Already this year, there have been six explosions, he said in an interview with **WorkersCompensation.com** (<http://www.workerscompensation.com/news.php>).

"Louisiana has a staggering number of industrial incidents and it appears to be going up," Zehl said. "Every explosion is not an accident. An explosion occurs when rules aren't followed and procedures aren't put into place. ...Almost every two months you have an explosion, it seems."

Zehl also said the oil and gas industry has an on-the-job fatality rate at seven times greater than any other U.S. industry, according to OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration).

Despite the fact that most platform workers work two weeks of 12-hour shifts, Zehl said he felt fatigue likely wasn't the cause of the accident.

"I've never seen fatigue as the culprit for one of these incidents," Zehl said. "It usually not one person doing something wrong. No one person is responsible for something like this. It's usually a failure to properly plan out the job."

This article was updated as of 10/16/17.