

The Worst Case Scenario: Part I

November 6th, 2002

By Chuck Goudie

ABC 7

By Chuck Goudie November 6, 2002 - Illinois has more plants housing large amounts of extremely hazardous chemicals than any other state in the nation. How easy would it be for terrorists to attack those plants? The I-Team has uncovered some disturbing answers. ABC7 investigative reporter Chuck Goudie reports.

While U.S. officials worry about whether Iraq will use chemical weapons overseas, tonight the I-Team has found what could be turned into a stockpile of chemical weapons in Chicago and the suburbs. Just as al Qaeda hijackers transformed jetliners into flying bombs on 9-11, federal authorities tonight are alarmed at how easily a terrorist could transform your neighborhood chemical plant into a weapon of mass destruction.

For years, chemical companies had only to worry about protecting against accidental spills, mishaps and fires. Now top U.S. security officials are warning chemical executives that the toxic threat is more sinister.

"We are a target rich environment. And you own most of the targets. Even if nine of ten of you don't think you're a potential target, but your enemy has said you are," said Tom Ridge, Homeland Security dir.

There are 628 plants in Illinois that would put at least a thousand people at risk in the event of a catastrophic chemical release. They are known as the "worst case scenarios" that federal environmental laws require companies to file and are available to the public. Tonight after examining records, the i-team has identified fifteen plants in the Chicago area that could affect as many as three million people in less than an hour, were one of them successfully attacked. "A suicidal terrorist could go in with a backpack of explosives and suddenly you have hundreds of thousands, or maybe millions of people, who are if not killed by that, harmed or injured," Rep. Jan Schakowsky(D), Chicago and northern suburbs.

What has authorities so concerned, is what our investigation bared at some Chicago area chemical plants: wide open gates and doors. automatic fencing that doesn't close properly. few or no security guards. tanks of lethal chemicals located right next to public roads...or along unprotected public waterways. fences that have missing barbed wire...or sizable gaps....or have been trampled to the ground. unchallenged access to chemical storage areas.

"It could jeopardize thousands and hundreds of thousands of people if somethin' were to happen," said one chemical plant worker, who works inside what terrorists might consider one of the most attractive industrial targets in northern Illinois, a plant that houses tons of deadly chemicals. We are shielding his identity because he says he would be fired for talking.

"Nothing has changed since nine-eleven...It's always in the back of your mind and you're constantly thinkin' about it. You don't know if this'll be your day," said the chemical worker. Consider PVS Chemical Company on Chicago's southeast side. If terrorists attacked there, according to the firm's worst-case scenario on file with U.S. authorities, a ten-minute release of sulfur dioxide would unleash a 14-mile toxic cloud affecting more than three million people. But

look at this part of PVS' perimeter fencing: we found huge holes and sections of broken down fencing right off a public road. And even though our camera was in full view for a half-hour, this security guard never questioned what we were doing. Company executives did not reply to our phone calls or e-mail.

Consider JLM Chemicals in suburban Blue Island, a phenol and acetone producer. The I-Team discovered the gate to JLM's employee parking lot wide open and the gate to the plant grounds also open.

ABC7's Chuck Goudie: How easy would it be for somebody to walk right through there?

Scott MacDonald, JLM vice pres. operations: I wouldn't imagine it would be too easy because as you know with everything that is going on in the world today, we're under a heightened alert ourselves so the employees are responsible for keeping their eye out on everything as well as the gates are being monitored by video.

But what about automatic gates that don't adequately close and perimeter fencing that would seem to do little to keep anyone out.

MacDonald: "Trust us. We don't want to be any more unsafe than anyone out here on the street is. We want to ensure everyone is safe around us and inside of our plant with our employees."

The I-Team returned to JLM nearly a month later. The gates were still open and there were still gaps in the fences. But executives-- who insist they have operated in a secure manner for nearly 39-years-- promise to have the fencing fixed soon and to add several more security cameras.

If you think the federal government is on top of these problems, forget it. More than one year after 9/11 and after repeated warnings from terrorism experts and law enforcement, there is still no federal law requiring security inspections at chemical plants.

"It would be most plant manager's worst nightmare to be the subject of a terrorist attack because they have not taken the fundamental, rudimentary steps to secure their facilities," said Bob Bostock, U.S. Environ. Protection Agency.

We all have reason for concern-- the FBI has been told that at least two of the September 11th hijackers had scouted chemical plants as possible targets--Mohammed Atta surveyed sulfur dioxide tanks in Tennessee; Marwan al Shehhi flew over a major oil refinery in Germany. Other hijackers had obtained U.S. hazardous waste-hauling permits. Also, there are new FBI warnings that al Qaeda may try to attack chemical storage depots.

"We can't just add another orange cone in front of a chemical facility and say we increased security," said Ashley Collins, Citizen Action Illinois.

Consider the Pelron Company in southwest suburban Lyons.

Plant worker, swatting our camera: "What are you up to?"

Goudie: "We're doing a story on your plant security..."

Worker: "Why?"

Newly upgraded front security fencing seems to protect the tanks of ethylene oxide, formaldehyde and three other poisonous chemicals. In a catastrophic failure, 125,000 people could be affected.

Chuck: You say people walk the perimeter?

John Lapinski, Pelron Mgr: We do at night, and during the day. We have gentleman right now out back who would be on a fork truck, and so on and so forth. They keep their eyes open.

They must have missed what the I-Team easily found. From a neighboring truck yard, we-- or a terrorist-- could have walked right onto the chemical plant through this rusty, broken-down fence.

Chuck: Are you aware that there is a point on the west side of your facility where anyone could just walk in?

Mgr: Ah, well we, that fence is being repaired, in the process of being repaired, so no, I am not aware of that.

Chuck: I mean that fence is completely down?

Mgr: If that fence is completely down, that means it was just knocked down in the last week or two. That's what I believe.

Two weeks after our surprise inspection, Pelron sent a photograph proving they have now fixed the fence, according to the manager "as best as possible" and stating that they take security seriously.