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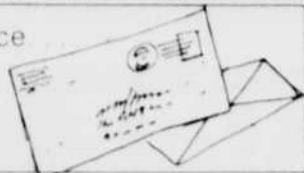
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Lack of spare parts killed workers



RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — A shortage of spare parts at a poultry plant where a fire killed 25 people forced workers to repair worn hydraulic lines that should have been replaced, four former employees said in a report published Tuesday.

The Sept. 3 fire at the Imperial Food Products chicken processing plant in Hamlet, about 90 miles southwest of Raleigh, began when a hydraulic line being repaired ruptured and sprayed flammable fluid on a gas-fired fryer, state investigators have said.

Former maintenance worker David Andrews said he repeatedly told plant manager Brad Roe, whose father owns the plant, that the lack of spare parts and equipment created a safety hazard.

"He would always say it was going to get better, we would get some parts later on," Andrews said. "But, it never got any better."

In separate interviews with The News & Observer of Ra-

leigh, Andrews and fellow former maintenance workers Bill Billingsley, Johnny Locklear and Robert Long said they frequently had to repair hydraulic lines because they leaked or broke away from fittings.

A fifth worker, Roger Hall, who was Imperial's maintenance manager for six months last year, agreed that the high-pressure lines leaked but said they were properly maintained. Imperial bought spare parts when they were needed, he said.

"If something had been busted, if something was real unsafe, I feel Brad Roe, instead of risking lives, would have shut the plant down and had it fixed," said Hall, whose wife was an Imperial supervisor until the fire shut down the plant.

Imperial spokeswoman Kelly Roe in Atlanta said she was unaware of any complaints about spare parts. She wouldn't comment further.

Hall said he fired Billingsley and Long because they were unreliable and failed to show up for work several times.

Billingsley said he quit because he was fed up with the plant. The News & Observer had no comment from Long, and the only Robert Long listed in the telephone book never worked at the plant, said a woman who answered his home phone Tuesday night.

Locklear, who worked at the plant for about six months last year, said he also was fired. He said maintenance workers frequently were asked to work 6- or 7-day weeks and he was too tired to work the day he was fired.

The four former workers told The News & Observer the leaks occurred as often as once a week.

Hydraulic fluid "would go all over the side of the machine and on the floor," said Andrews, who worked as a maintenance worker at the plant for about six months starting late last year. The newspaper didn't say how Andrews' employment at the plant ended. There was no answer Tuesday night at the listed number of a David Andrews in Hamlet.

NATIONAL BRIEFS

Government delays sexual study

WASHINGTON (AP) — The government is delaying a study of adult sexual behavior that was to assist in AIDS research because of worries that it may draw opposition from the White House and Congress, an official said Tuesday.

"We felt that the climate wasn't right," said Wendy Baldwin, chief of the Demographic and Behavioral Science Branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

The National Institutes of Health had awarded a \$1 million grant to the National Opinion Research Center in Chicago to conduct the study.

Last week, however, the researchers were told that the money was being held up, according to a report in Wednesday's editions of The Washington Post, which first reported the incident.

Ms. Baldwin said the institute had planned to ask for money for the study this fiscal year but now plans to hold off until after the start of the next financial year. That happens next week.

"It didn't seem to be an ideal time to go ahead with the study," Ms. Baldwin said in a telephone interview from her suburban Maryland home.

The said the results of the study could have helped AIDS researchers but there has been opposition from the White House and Congress over similar sex surveys.

Health and Human Services Secretary Louis Sullivan stopped a \$18 million survey last July that was to look into teenage sexual practices.

Missouri: Center of the nation

WASHINGTON (AP) — The nation's center of population is near the small southeastern Missouri community of Steelville, the Census Bureau confirmed Tuesday.

The bureau calculates the country's center of population once a decade, following the census.

Rep. Bill Emerson, R-Mo., said the new center has been pinpointed on a wooded plot 9.7 miles southeast of Steelville, a community of nearly 1,500.

A Census Bureau spokesman confirmed the Missouri site and said it would be officially announced later.

In 1980, the population center was near DeSoto, a Missouri community about 50 miles northeast of Steelville.

'Senator' Bono?

PALM SPRINGS, Calif. (AP) — Sonny Bono said Tuesday he was reconsidering a run for the U.S. Senate.

Bono, half the Sonny and Cher pop duo in the 1970s and mayor of this desert resort town since 1988, said a Senate bid was a possibility "if we get all the ducks lined up the way we want."

Bono, a Republican, said he will make an announcement next week.

Both of California's Senate seats, held by Democrat Alan Cranston and Republican John Seymour, are up for grabs in 1992.

Cranston is retiring and Seymour was appointed by Gov. Pete Wilson to succeed Wilson after the gubernatorial election last November.

Bono announced in January that he would not be a candidate for the Senate and would run for re-election as mayor.

He said a statewide race would put too much strain on his family. His wife, Mary, was expecting the couple's second child at the time. Since his daughter Chianna's birth in February, his home life is more settled, Bono said.

Henson gets his star

LOS ANGELES (AP) — "Muppets" creator Jim Henson was honored posthumously Tuesday with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame during a somber ceremony.

Actress Daryl Hannah, comedian Ruth Buzzi and "Barney Miller" star Hal Linden joined 200 people for the Hollywood Boulevard unveiling on what would have been Henson's 55th birthday. Henson died in May 1990.

"If Jim were here, he would have said, 'This is neat,'" Henson's longtime agent and friend Bernie Brillstein said at the unveiling of the 1,938th star along the walkway.

No music was played and none of the "Muppets" characters appeared.

A double-decker bus bearing a "We miss Jim" sign rolled past, and green, helium-filled balloons were released, apparently in reference to the song "It's Not Easy Being Green" by Kermit the Frog.

Henson is best known for his Emmy-winning TV series "The Muppet Show," the animated series "Muppet Babies" and HBO's "Fraggle Rock."