

Still waiting for answers in plant explosion

Former Shearer's safety manager alleges bad record for former employer

By ERICK PETERSON
Hermiston Herald

HERMISTON — Forty people are trying to figure out why a boiler exploded at Hermiston Shearer's Foods plant on Feb. 22, causing a fire that destroyed the building and put 231 people out of work.

Scott Goff, Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 investigator, said on Tuesday, April 5, the examination of the site has been delayed. First, there was trouble because the rubble was so great it was difficult to sort through it. Also, it took time to bring together involved parties. In the past couple of days, big winds pushed back the investigation, which was the latest delay.

The examination of the destroyed Hermiston plant, which once employed 231 people, has brought people from the fire district, Shearer's, insurance carriers and representatives of involved equipment and contractors, according to Goff.

Speculation on the cause

Though the direct cause of the cause of the explosion is yet unknown, one former Shearer's Foods employee claims lax safety measures might have contributed to the explosion.

"I saw a lot of things," Stephen Dean said. "I spoke with several peers that I had that no longer work there about how many conversations I had about that place being a time bomb."

According to Dean, when he heard of the explosion and the resulting fire, the first words that came out of his mouth were, "I told you so." He said he was surprised

the fire, which destroyed the building, sent a handful of people to the hospital and left 231 people out of work, was not worse. After all, no one died.

He said he was plant safety manager, working directly with the management team. He said he "provided safety culture and influence and direct safety policy and procedure" for about one year, from early 2018 to early 2019.

The Hermiston Herald contacted the Shearer's corporate office to verify Dean's employment. Shearer's management, though, stated the company would not share employment information out of respect for employees and their confidentiality.

Dean, however, was able to present a letter of hire and his own resignation letter as evidence he had worked there.

Early in his employment, he said, he did some in depth looks into the facility to identify risks and hazards and found some he deemed as "high risk" and "high consequence." He was particularly worried about oil fires, he said.

While he was at the plant, Dean said, there were "a bunch of mini-fires," which were the result of material building up in ovens. In policies and procedures, he said, workers were supposed to rake out the ovens when in a safe state. According to Dean, procedures changed so workers were using compressed air to clean the ovens instead.

"You don't put compressed air onto fires," he said.

He said this is just one example of the culture at the plant. Practices were unsafe, not necessarily because any one person was directing them poorly, but because those practices shifted towards being unsafe, he said. Dean said once people start doing things one way, they pass on those habits to



Equipment is in place to remove sections of debris from the destroyed Shearer's Foods plant in Hermiston on Monday, April 4, 2022.

Erick Peterson/Hermiston Herald

new workers and behaviors become engrained.

OSHA weighs in

Aaron Corvin is the public information officer for Oregon Occupational Safety and Health, or Oregon OSHA. He confirmed that the agency is investigating the Feb. 22 explosion and fire. He stated in an email, however, OSHA does not discuss the status or details of active cases and he would share information about it once the investigation is complete.

"In the past five years, Oregon OSHA has conducted four inspections of this site, two of which resulted in citations. One of the citations followed an accident investigation," Corvin said.

In one of the cases, he said, the employer initially filed an appeal of the citation but then later withdrew the appeal.

Missing safety meetings were among the causes for citation.

Complaints of safety problems

Dean said he brought up major safety hazards to the directors of the company when in the company.

"I couldn't get anywhere with management," he said. "They were spending millions on production and innovation, but they were spending nothing on the safety department. Whereas they had an astronomical production budget, we had roughly just enough to pay for personal protection equipment."

Dean described his employment as "working from nothing" and "building a grassroots program when there was nothing to work with." He said he quit out of frustration. An "agent of change in the industry," he said he has long worked to fix safety issues at different

companies. After working with Shearer's, he felt he could not improve safety, as he could not encourage management to prioritize safety.

"It was a direct problem of management, in my opinion," Dean said, "in how they viewed and prioritized and felt toward the safety of the employees at the plant."

He said he repeatedly brought up safety concerns to senior management, but to no avail. Not only did managers fail to make changes, they dismissed his recommendations entirely.

"Their direct, verbatim, response to me when I raised these safety concerns was to 'calm my tits; they've been doing this for 40 years.' That's the phrase they used," he said.

Meanwhile, Dean said, the company was neglecting environmental regulations, too.

The one thing he said he was able to do was to create

an active evacuation plan, something the company lacked prior to his employment. He said he also organized evacuation drills.

"It was difficult to do, because it affected production," he said.

He added there were additional concerns, especially when it came to the treatment of workers.

"They'd work people till they couldn't work anymore," he said. This was a safety concern, he said, because exhausted workers would intentionally break lockout-tagout safety rules. Having broken these rules, management would punish them with three-day suspensions.

"It was motivation for them to take their breaks," Dean stated.

He said his co-workers would regularly point out their own infractions, just to be sent home for rest or to attend a funeral or some other necessary event.

West end Umatilla River Trails Project moves forward

By JOHN TILLMAN
East Oregonian

UMATILLA — The Umatilla River Trails Project is a system of paths connecting Umatilla, Hermiston, Stanfield and Echo to increase recreational opportunities and community livability.

The project is on the way to becoming a reality.

"We've been working on the project for seven years," said former Umatilla County Commissioner Bill Elfering, chair of the trails committee. "Now we have the first segment pretty well settled from the Columbia River to Hermiston. It's about 7 miles, with views of the river most of the way. The stretch from Hermiston to Stanfield to Echo is still in the works."

Public input was received through a survey and a meeting in October 2019. The plan then was to select one of five routes in 2020.

"COVID put us behind schedule," Elfering said. "And the flood. But we've narrowed it down to three routes."

He explained the trail, as much as possible, uses public rights of way, such as county roads and irrigation ditch embankments.

"We want as little impact on private property as possible," Elfering said. "We won't condemn any at all. Some private landowners



Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

A stretch of the Umatilla River Trail will follow the river from Umatilla along River Road toward Hermiston. Eventually the system will link four towns: Umatilla, Hermiston, Stanfield and Echo.

are welcoming. Others not so much."

And the project needs grant searchers and writers to help with funding, and Elfering said there is money available for bicycle paths. But applications must wait for the engineering report by Anderson Perry & Associates. He also said the Umatilla County Planning Department has been involved from the beginning, securing a \$250,000 grant, that helped with matching funds.

"Umatilla and Hermiston have a lot of existing infrastructure which we can connect," Umatilla County Planning Director Robert

Waldher said. "Hermiston's parks will be incorporated into the trails, as the terminus of Phase I of the project."

Stanfield and Echo are growing rapidly and developing infrastructure that can also be part of the project.

"Echo had over 400 people at its Red to Red cross-country mountain bike event," Waldher said. "That has a big economic impact."

Longer term, Waldher said, the stretch from Hermiston to Stanfield will be more of a challenge.

"It's subject to constraints, with indus-

trial areas, the railroad and Highway 395," he explained. "But momentum is building. We have gotten technical assistance from the National Park Service and other federal agencies."

The 2020 floods washed out the pedestrian bridge over the Umatilla River, but that is in the process of rebuilding. Still, Waldher said, the project is looking at sites for another footbridge over the Umatilla River.

"The river isn't accessible on public land all along its length, so we need to cross over it," he said.

The project also is moving from concept to implementation.

"We're refining the details and studying engineering," Waldher said. "Our implementation committee consists of two members from each of the four communities, plus two

members from the county. We drove alternative routes (recently). The whole route from Umatilla to Echo will be around 25 miles long, depending on the alternatives selected."

The trails can benefit health, recreation and tourism, he said, but there are environmental and cultural surveys to conduct, and the trails have to be meet federal accessibility requirements.

While Waldher is involved, he said the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners does not want tax revenue going to the trails project, so the committee is seeking state and federal funding.

"Bringing it to fruition will be a lengthy process, but community support is there," he said.

"I probably won't live to see it happen, but I'd like eventually to extend the trail all the way to Pendleton," Elfering said. "It's county road most of the way."

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