



Top emergency official says he never warned West of a potential threat

by BRETT SHIPP

WFAA

Posted on May 2, 2013 at 9:50 PM

Updated yesterday at 9:52 PM

NEWS 8 INVESTIGATES

WEST, Texas -- The top emergency management official in McLennan County made a series of sobering admissions Thursday.

Among other things, McLennan County Emergency Management Coordinator Frank Patterson said he was not aware of the explosive levels of chemicals being stored at the West Fertilizer Company. He also said he never met with West city officials about a potential disaster at the fertilizer facility.

What started out as a news conference designed to discredit a series of News 8 investigative reports, quickly went south for Patterson. Before it was over, he would admit his office was not prepared for the worst in West.

Our investigation raised questions about McLennan County's planning for a chemical disaster, especially given the potentially-explosive amounts of ammonium nitrate located at the fertilizer warehouse in West. The key question being asked by News 8 for more than one week: Did the County organize a Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC), as mandated by federal law?

Every county is required to have one in order to develop emergency response plans, review those plans annually, and provide information about dangerous chemicals to citizens.

At the beginning of Thursday's press gathering at the McLennan County Courthouse, Patterson set out to attack the News 8 investigation.

"Let me make this clear," Patterson said. "McLennan County has an LEPC that actively works with local industry and the first-response community."

He went on to declare, with respect to the emergency response in West, "the plan worked." Patterson told reporters his LEPC meets every year, and is active and thorough in its planning.

But over the past week, News 8 has repeatedly asked for evidence of the McLennan County LEPC's existence and has been shown nothing.

Thursday, when other reporters began asking similar questions, Patterson's answers revealed what appears to be a lack of preparation for what happened in West.

Patterson was asked if he was aware the warehouse full of ammonium nitrate could explode.

"If you're asking me, sitting here right now? No," Patterson said.

Next, was Patterson aware of a major threat at the facility, as was indicated on Tier Two chemical reports submitted by the plant owner to his office?

"With the amount of Tier Two reports that come through my office, I do not read every one of them," Patterson said. "They are forwarded to first responders. Again, I don't read every one of those."

Ultimately, Patterson admitted that he did not act on the information supplied to him by the facility in West or warn the community of a potential threat.

"There's no doubt this is not a perfect system," Patterson said.

Patterson left the news conference without showing reporters any evidence that McLennan County's LEPC exists, despite cradling a folder stacked with documents that he repeatedly referred to as important LEPC documents. Again, we repeatedly asked that he show us what information he was possessing.

E-mail [**bshipp@wfaa.com**](mailto:bshipp@wfaa.com)