

**Interview of George Barta – 8/24/00**

George B. Barta  
2-14-01

### INTERVIEW SUMMARY

**Witness:** George Barta, (age 43) Operation Specialist Lead, Carlsbad Complex

**Time and Date of Interview:** 1:00 PM, August 24, 2000

**Location:** Room 121, Dept. of Energy Building, Carlsbad, New Mexico

**Investigators:** Chuck Koval, Eric Sager  
*Chuck Koval* *Eric Sager*

**Accident:** El Paso Natural Gas Company Rupture and Fire Near Carlsbad, New Mexico (August 19, 2000)

**Digest:**

Mr. Barta answered questions from Safety Board PH operations and human performance investigators. Also present were Mr. Robert Rojas, Ms. Norma Dunn, and Mr. Clovis McArthur who attended as Mr. Barta's representative. Mr. Barta was asked about his work background with El Paso Natural Gas; and his actions on August 19 at the Pecos River station and fire.

Mr. Barta stated that he had been employed by El Paso Natural Gas for 24 years. He described his company experience primarily as working with mechanical maintenance. He said that he has been in his present job for four years. He indicated that he reports to Mr. John R. Cole and this job is considered a supervisory [position]. Mr. Barta said that twelve persons report to him: five are control technicians who work with electrical instrumentation and seven are operating specialists. His office is in Carlsbad.

maintaining DOT regulatory compliance + the plants,

Mr. Barta stated that he is responsible for four transmission plants: Pecos River, Washington Ranch, Gresham and Guadalupe. He described his job as keeping the stations operating reliably, scheduling work and overseeing plant maintenance. He also performs minor maintenance. He explained that if a turbine tripped, he would be responsible for finding out what the problem was and restarting it. He said that heavy maintenance for the stations is handled by the company's maintenance group.

overseeing the operation specialists who

Mr. Barta said that on August 19 he became aware of a problem when Mr. Abigt [controller] at the gas control group [system control center] in El Paso called him at home on the telephone. The controller told him that two turbines had tripped off line at Pecos River station. Mr. Barta checked his wrist watch and noted the time of the call was 0520. He recalled that he told Mr. Abigt he would contact some control persons and go see what the problem was. He said that Mr. Abigt did not give him any instructions. Mr. Barta explained that it was up to him to decide what to do. He called two employees, Jose Sanchez (a control technician who was carrying the pager for that weekend)

L All times are mountain daylight savings time

Shipley (GBB) the operation specialist assigned to and Fred Shipley (the operator of the Pecos River station) and told them to go to the Pecos River station. Mr. Barta said that as he was getting dressed to go to the station, Mr. Abigt called him back (at about 0530). Mr. Abigt told Mr. Barta that there might be a problem and a blowout at the Pecos River station. Mr. Barta indicated that he told Mr. Abigt to hold on a second and he went to his back door to look in the direction of the station. He saw fire, returned to the telephone and told Mr. Abigt there was a fire.

Mr. Barta said as he was driving to the station he could see the glow of the fire at the river. He also recalled hearing Larry Charlet and Henry Salgado talking on the radio but did not remember what they were talking about.

Whitethorn Mr. Barta said that he believed he was the first gas company employee to arrive at the 725 White Horn Road entrance gate to the Pecos River station. He said the Loving Fire Department was waiting for company employees at the gate. He said that he then drove by himself down to the station and saw that the AC service was off (because the station lights were off). He estimated that he arrived at the station at about 0610. He explained that when the AC service was lost, DC auxiliary power was supposed to come on automatically and operate the turbine cool down pumps (for the turbine bearings). Mr. Barta recalled his first action at the station was to go into the control room and check the DC power panel confirming that DC was available and that the cool down pumps had come on. He indicated that he understood the status of the station soon after his arrival and that the ESDs [emergency shutdowns] were associated with the blowout. He also said that he followed standard emergency shutdown procedure to vent all gas and take all electricity from the station.

He said that Mr. Sanchez and Mr. Shipley arrived and they checked the rest of the station together determining that everything was okay. Then Mr. Barta recalled telling them, "let's run over to the 3191 [is this the 6 3/4 valve?] to see if everything is okay." They crossed the road (not more than 500 yards) [is this White Horn Road or another road? AND is this on the station property?] and looked over the 3191 line. Mr. Barta said that he wanted to make sure the [3191] valve was closed because he was trying to isolate the South Carlsbad station from the Pecos River station. The 3191 line block valve is located outside the plant fence on EPNG's right of way just east of the Pecos River Station.

He said that he expected the 3191 valve to be closed because if there was an overpressure on the line, it would have closed [automatically]. He noted that the valve was open and concluded that there was no overpressure. Mr. Barta also indicated that he knew exactly what the fire was.

He said although one person could have closed the valve by himself, the three gas company employees worked two at a time through the full closure. He estimated that it took between 1 and 1 1/2 minutes to close the valve. He explained that under normal circumstances this took 1 1/2 minutes. Mr. Barta said that the valve operated satisfactorily and they did not need to "break" the valve with a lever before the wheel turned. When they finished closing the valve (at 0615 or 0617), Mr. Barta called the

Whitethorn  
outside the plant  
see on whitethorn  
id.

GBB  
to the plant  
and

GBB  
informed that  
the ESD system  
worked properly

satisfactorily  
GBB

pumps and see it (GBB)

System detected the rupture and protect the plant (GBB)

Shipley (GBB)

triggered the overpressure regulator and closed automatically

control center on his cell phone and reported that the valve was closed. He assured investigators that all of his communication with the control center was by cell phone.

Mr. Barta said that he sent Mr. Sanchez and Mr. Shipley back to the gate <sup>whitethorn Rd</sup> <sup>(BBB)</sup> ~~for White Horn Road~~ to tell the fire department personnel to <sup>stand by</sup> ~~come in~~. He said that he could hear Larry Charlet and Henry Salgado on the radio and he knew that they were at the accident site. He said that he called Larry Charlet on the radio and asked if there was anything more [he and his two coworkers] should do, and Mr. Charlet said no.

<sup>(BBB)</sup> Mr. Barta said that he was familiar with the 3191 valve they closed because occasionally he had accompanied service employees when they performed <sup>full</sup> <sup>(BBB)</sup> maintenance on the valve regulators. He also said that during his first year at this complex he had been through a simulation for a blowout on the South Carlsbad line [i.e., the same line,] where the line crossed the Black River Village.

- required regulatory DOT provisions

He called the control center to ask if anyone had taken South Carlsbad <sup>Station 600</sup> off line and he was told field services people were en route to take it off line. He did not know who the field services persons were that were sent to the station.

Mr. Barta told Mr. Sanchez and Mr. Shipley to stay at the entrance to the station "to be on standby" and to help with any crowd control. He told them not to let anyone into the site of the fire who did not need to be there. When Mr. Barta was questioned about why the fire department vehicles were prevented from proceeding past the station area to the fire, he answered [they were stopped because] the heavy trucks would have gotten stuck in the sand.

Mr. Barta said he then drove from the station by himself to the <sup>west side of the</sup> <sup>(BBB)</sup> drive-over <sup>(BBB)</sup> (concrete) bridge at the river with the intention of <sup>(BBB)</sup> assisting fire department personnel at the fire. When he saw there were survivors, he came back <sup>(BBB)</sup> to where the emergency personnel were <sup>(BBB)</sup> staying and directed an ambulance down to the site. <sup>providing assistance</sup>

He remained at the site until about 3:00 PM that afternoon. He indicated that through the afternoon, he helped EMTs, assisted fire department personnel and directed some vehicle traffic.

End Interview

Mr. Barta indicated that one four wheel drive fire truck and a company four wheel drive truck were already on scene and he was concerned that if a larger fire truck attempted to go down the narrow and sandy access road it would get stuck and create other problems. <sup>(BBB)</sup>