



National Transportation Safety Board
Office of Railroad Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Investigations
Human Performance and Survival Factors Division
Washington, D.C. 20594

October 18, 2001

SURVIVAL FACTORS GROUP CHAIRMAN'S FACTUAL REPORT, Revision 1¹

A. Accident

Carrier: El Paso Natural Gas Company
100 North Stanton St. El Paso, Texas 79901-1442

Location: El Paso Natural Gas Pipeline Pecos River Crossing
Adjacent to Route 725, Eddy County, New Mexico

Date: August 19, 2000

Time: 0530 Mountain Daylight Time

Number: DCA-99-MP001

B. Group Members

(James J. Gildea	NTSB Group Chairman) ²
Joseph Kris	NTSB Group Chairman
Daniel L. Kiper	Sergeant, New Mexico State Police
Michael Shannon	Assistant Fire Chief, Carlsbad Fire Department
Robert Rojas	El Paso Natural Gas Company

C. Summary

About 0530, the El Paso Natural Gas transmission pipeline ruptured near the point where the pipeline crosses the Pecos River, adjacent to New Mexico State Route 725 in Eddy County, New Mexico. After the rupture, a natural gas fire started and burned for approximately 51 minutes. The fire destroyed three pickup trucks that were parked in the vicinity and miscellaneous camping equipment.

As a result of the fire, seven adults, three children and two infants were fatally injured.

¹ Revised to incorporate additional factual information provided in an October 10, 2001 letter from El Paso Natural Gas Company. The additional information is italicized in this revised report.

² On August 25, 2001, Mr. Gildea retired from federal service. Mr. Kris has assumed his duties as NTSB Group Chairman for this investigation.

D. **Details of the Investigation**

1. **Medical and Pathological**

Fatal Injuries

According to the New Mexico State Police and a New Mexico State Medical Examiner's investigator, six persons were found with fatal burns after the fire near the east bank of the Pecos River. They were taken to the New Mexico State Medical Examiner's Office, Albuquerque.

Timber Heady, female, 6-months was found on the east river bank near the north side of the El Paso Natural Gas Company Pecos River Bridge. The cause of death was extensive thermal burns.

Tamber Heady, female, 6-months was found on the east river bank near the north side of the El Paso Natural Gas Company Pecos River Bridge. The cause of death was extensive thermal burns.

Kelsey Heady, female, 21-months, was found on the east river bank near the north side of the El Paso Natural Gas Company Pecos River Bridge. The cause of death was extensive thermal burns.

Dustin Smith, male, 3-years, was found in the interior of a 1978 Ford pickup truck which was parked south of the east end of the El Paso Natural Gas Company, Pecos River Bridge. The cause of death was extensive thermal burns and smoke inhalation.

Terry Smith, male, 23-years, was found approximately 40 feet south of the east end of the El Paso Natural Gas Company Pecos River Bridge. The cause of death was extensive thermal burns and carbon monoxide poisoning.

Jessie Don Sumler, male, 55-years, was found approximately 92 feet south of the east end of the El Paso Natural Gas Company Pecos River Bridge. The cause of death was extensive thermal burns with charring and carbon monoxide poisoning.

Six persons who temporarily survived the fire entered the Pecos River from the east bank at the bridge. All were located ¼ mile downstream on the west bank by an El Paso Gas Company employee and emergency responders. Four persons died later on August 19, 2000. Two persons survived for longer periods of time.

Glenda Sumler, female, 47-years died on August 19, 2000 at University Medical Center, Lubbock, Texas. According to the Lubbock County Medical Examiner, the cause of death was 50 percent total body surface burns with severe inhalation injuries.

Roy D. Heady, male, 20-years died on August 19, 2000 at University Medical Center, Lubbock, Texas. According to the Lubbock County Medical Examiner, the cause of death was 80 percent total body surface burns.

Amy Heady, female, 18-years died on August 19, 2000 at University Medical Center, Lubbock, Texas. According to the Lubbock County Medical Examiner, the cause of death was 90 percent total body surface burns. The upper airways showed burn injuries.

Bobby Smith, male, 43-years died on August 21, 2000 at University Medical Center, Lubbock, Texas. According to the Lubbock County Medical Examiner, the cause of death was 60 percent total body surface burns.

Kirsten Sumler, female, 5-years died at 2134, August 19, 2000, shortly after arrival at Shriners Hospital, Galveston, Texas. According to the prosector of the Department of Pathology, Shriners Hospital, Galveston Texas, the cause of death was 80 percent total body surface burns of which 65 percent were 3rd degree burns.

Amanda Sumler Smith, female, 25-years died on September 5, 2000 at University Medical Center, Lubbock, Texas. According to the Lubbock County Medical Examiner, the cause of death was complications of burns. The medical examiner noted that she developed acute pneumonia and defused alveolar damage (hyaline membrane disease- adult respiratory distress syndrome).

2. Emergency Response

Fire Department Response

About 0531, a 911-call receiver (operator) received numerous telephone calls from residents in the area who reported a large explosion and fire. The 911-call receiver received a telephone call from an off duty El Paso Natural Gas employee who lived near the accident site. The employee gave the 911-call receiver the location of the fire, and stated that there had been a large fire. The same employee witnessed the residual fire and assisted in the rescue of survivors. *The El Paso coordinator also called the New Mexico State police.*

At 0531, the 911-call receiver paged members of the Loving Volunteer Fire Department, Happy Valley Volunteer Fire Department, Joel Volunteer Fire Department and Otis Volunteer Fire Department.

At 0535, the Carlsbad Fire Department was notified to respond. At 0538, the Carlsbad Fire Department was enroute and arrived on scene at 0612. Although the location of the fire was in rural Eddy County, incident command was turned over to the Assistant Chief of the Carlsbad Fire Department by the Loving Volunteer Fire Department because of the large number of injuries and the crucial need for emergency medical personnel and equipment.

All responding units were staged approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from the site on Route 275, at the El Paso Natural Gas Company compressor station. At 0621, two El Paso Natural Gas Company employees manually finished closing pipeline valves. Afterwards, an El Paso Natural Gas Company employee who had been closing valves notified emergency responders that persons on the scene were injured. Emergency responders proceeded to search for victims on the perimeter of the affected area and located the survivors in the Pecos River and in dense brush on the west bank of the Pecos River.

Although the fire in the pipeline subsided and eventually was extinguished, small brush fires continued to burn and were extinguished by the fire departments. By 1017, the fire departments that responded were placed back in service.

Medical Response

Three Carlsbad Fire Department Ambulances, Medic 1, 3, and 4, and Harkness Ambulance, a private ambulance company responded to the incident.

Medic 1 transported Amanda Sumler Smith to Carlsbad Medical Center. From the Carlsbad Medical Center she was transported to University Medical Center, Lubbock, Texas by Southwest Air Ambulance, Midland, Texas.

Medic 3 transported Bobby Smith, Amy Smith Heady and Glenda Sumler to The Carlsbad Airport. Bobby Smith and Glenda Sumler were transported to the University Medical Center by a Military Air Support Services helicopter. Aero Care Helicopter, Lubbock, Texas transported Amy Smith Heady to University Medical Center, Lubbock, Texas.

Medic 4 transported Kirsten Sumler to Carlsbad Medical Center. From Carlsbad Medical Center she was transported to University Medical Center, Lubbock, Texas by Southwest Air Ambulance, Carlsbad, New Mexico arriving at 1230. She was resuscitated and transferred to the Shiners Burn Center, Galveston, Texas by Air Ambulance arriving at 2100. She was pronounced dead at 2134.

Harkness Ambulance transported Roy Heady to the Carlsbad Airport. He was transported to University Medical Center by Aero Care Ambulance airplane, Lubbock, Texas.

Police Response

At 0530, a New Mexico State Police supervisor and an officer were notified of the fire and responded to the site. At 0551, a Loving Police Department unit arrived on scene as well as units from the Eddy County Sheriffs

Department. Law enforcement officers were responsible for securing the scene of the accident and providing traffic control on roads leading into the site. The New Mexico State Police conducted the investigation of the accident for the State of New Mexico. The Roswell, New Mexico Police Department provided a mobile command post, which was used to coordinate the recovery of the deceased victims and to provide relief from the extreme weather conditions for emergency responders.

Damage

According to the New Mexico State Police, three vehicles and miscellaneous camping equipment were destroyed by fire. Vehicle #1, a 1985 Ford 150 pickup truck, was destroyed. Vehicle #2, a 1978 Ford 150 pickup truck equipped with a slide-in camper, was destroyed. Vehicle #3, a 1997 Ford Ranger pickup truck was destroyed.

3. Disaster Preparedness

The New Mexico State Police declared the accident a hazardous materials incident. Therefore, the state police were responsible for the emergency management of the incident. After the state police supervisor arrived on the scene, he decided that sufficient personnel and equipment had arrived to manage the scene and that it was not necessary to implement either the Eddy County disaster plan or the New Mexico state disaster plan.

The local natural gas companies conduct an annual safety meeting with local emergency responders and law enforcement personnel. At the annual meeting, the gas companies reiterate safety precautions at natural gas emergencies, and through written tests, quiz emergency responders on safety issues. The last 4 safety meetings were held on November 20, 1997, October 27, 1998, October 14, 1999, and October 17, 2000.

El Paso Natural Gas Company has conducted internal simulated disaster drills in Texas and New Mexico and responded to actual emergencies. On November 21, 1997, El Paso Natural Gas Company conducted a simulated gas leak in Eddy County with an evacuation. The Eddy County Sheriff's Office was involved as well as the Eddy County Disaster Coordinator.

On August 29, 1997 a simulated leak occurred inside a compressor station on their Keystone Mainline. The simulated leak tested the readiness of the compressor station personnel.

On January 27, 1998, approximately 100 feet of line number 1103 ruptured in Hudspeth County, Texas. No injuries or deaths occurred. Texas emergency response agencies surrounding Sierra Blanca, Texas responded.

Joseph Kris
Forensic Investigator – Survival Factors