Liquid Nitrogen Safety Fatality File

Georgia nitrogen deaths: Leak kills six at Gainesville poultry plant.

A leak of liquid nitrogen at a poultry plant in the US state of Georgia has killed six people.

Officials say 12 others were hospitalized following Thursday's incident at the Foundation Food Group plant in the city of Gainesville.

Several firefighters who were called to the scene were among those treated.

Georgia is a leading poultry-producing state and Gainesville is at the centre of the industry. Thousands of people work in the city's processing plants.

The cause of Thursday's leak at the plant, formerly known as Prime Pak Foods, is being investigated.

Zach Brackett, Hall County Fire Department Chief, said emergency services were called to the scene at 10:12 local time (17:12 GMT) to a report of people with burns.

Chief Brackett said on arrival they found a "large contingent of employees" who had evacuated the plant, including some experiencing "medical emergencies".

In total 130 people were taken for to a local church for medical evaluation following the incident.

Five people were found dead at the scene, and one died after being taken to hospital, officials said.

Beth Downs, a spokeswoman for Northeast Georgia Medical Center,

said three of those taken to hospital were in a critical condition.

A number of the injured, including three fire officials who complained of breathing difficulties, were later discharged.

A representative for Foundation Food Group said a preliminary investigation suggested a nitrogen line had ruptured inside the facility in what he described as a “tragic accident”.

Those who died included maintenance, supervisory and management team members, spokesman Nicholas Ancrum said.

“Every team member is equally important to us, and our hearts go out to their families and communities that have suffered such a devastating loss,” he told an afternoon news briefing.

Nitrogen is often used in refrigeration systems and cannot be detected by smell in the air. Breathing the gas can be deadly because it displaces oxygen in the lungs and can cause asphyxiation.

Fourteen workers died from asphyxiation linked to nitrogen in US accidents from 2012 to 2020, according to figures quoted by the AP news agency.

Chief Brackett earlier confirmed local investigators and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) were at the site trying to determine what had happened.

The Governor of Georgia, Brian Kemp, described the incident as a “tragedy” in a statement.