Oil and Gas Extraction Fatality File

Husband, wife die in Texas oilfield gas leak while their kids wait in the car

An oilfield company in West Texas is facing charges after a husband and wife died from a gas leak inside a company-owned facility, as their children waited for them in a car outside, according to the Department of Justice. The charges, announced Tuesday, March 8, stem from the fatal incident on Oct. 26, 2019, authorities said in a news release. That night, Jacob Dean – an employee of Odessa-based Aghorn Operating Inc. – received a call to check on a pump house located on an oilfield in Odessa, according to federal officials.

He didn't return home when expected and wasn't answering calls from his wife, Natalee Dean. Growing worried, she drove out to the pump house to check on her husband, bringing their children, ages 6 and 9, along for the ride. While the kids waited in the car, she went in to find her husband and never came back out.

"A pump had failed in the pump house, causing a leak of produced water containing hydrogen sulfide," the release said. Produced water is a byproduct of oil and gas production and can contain harmful chemicals. "Jacob had been overcome by hydrogen sulfide in the pump house, and when Natalee arrived at the station, she exited the vehicle and proceeded to the pump house, where she too was overcome by the gas," the release said, adding that both were pronounced dead at the scene by first responders.

"Aghorn was aware that its produced water contained high amounts of H2S as well as the deadly nature of the gas," an indictment read, alleging that Aghorn and its vice president "knowingly violated their general duty to prevent the accidental release [of

the gas],” and knowingly put lives at risk. McClatchy News reached out to Aghorn Operating Inc. by phone and the company declined to comment. Hydrogen sulfide gas is colorless but has a “strong odor of rotten eggs,” according to the CDC. Depending on the concentration, people who are exposed to the gas could collapse within minutes or experience “knockdown,” or immediate collapse, within 1 to 2 breaths, according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Aghorn Operating Inc. and company Vice President Trent Day are accused of “obstructing” an investigation into the couple’s deaths and of violating the Clean Air Act, according to federal officials. Aghorn, Day, and another company called Kodiak Roustabout Inc., are also charged with breaking the Safe Drinking Water Act and “making false statements” to state officials “regarding the mechanical integrity of Aghorn injection wells.”