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Environmental groups warned about wood pellet risks

JOSH REYES
Omaha World-Herald

Environmental groups have sounded the alarm for years about wood pellets as a source of fuel, highlighting both the environmental repercussions of mass manufacturing and burning of the material and its potential to combust and cause fires or even explosions.

A 2018 report from the Environmental Integrity Project stated at least eight of the 15 largest wood pellet facilities in the U.S. have had fires or explosions. Within the last year, wood pellet facilities in New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Arkansas and Portugal have had fires.

The latest pellet manufacturer fire happened Tuesday in Fremont, where the Horizon Biofuels facility was the site of an explosion.

A day later, crews found the body of a man who had been missing and were searching

for two girls in what officials described as a recovery effort.

The company used recycled wood material to make pellets and animal bedding.

Their site had a fire in 2014 that did not cause any injuries. The facility has dry storage capacity for almost 2,000 tons in towers that used to hold animal feed for Golden Sun Feeds.

“There are a good number of plants that have had four or five fires or explosions,” said Patrick Anderson, a senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center. “It’s pretty endemic to the industry, especially combustible wood dust explosions.”

Anderson previously worked for the Environmental Integrity Project and co-authored the report on pellet facilities. He said the primary focus he’s had on pellet manufacturing is large companies making a large



NIKOS FRAZIER, THE WORLD-HERALD

Firefighters continued to battle a fire Wednesday after an explosion at Horizon Biofuels in Fremont on Tuesday.

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DUST DEEMED CAUSE OF PLANT EXPLOSION THAT KILLED 3



CHRIS MACHIAN, THE WORLD-HERALD

South Union Street remains closed around Horizon Biofuels two days after an explosion and fire killed three people, in Fremont on Thursday, July 31, 2025.

Horizon Biofuels officials make statement

JUSTIN DIEP
Omaha World-Herald

The Tuesday explosion of a wood pellet manufacturing plant in Fremont that killed a worker and two young girls is believed to have been caused by a dust fire, the Nebraska fire marshal said Thursday.

The Nebraska State Fire Marshal’s Office said in a press release that a preliminary investigation shows an accidental dust explosion occurred during the manufacturing process at the Horizon Biofuels plant, 950 S Union St. The blast shook nearby buildings, crumbled

much of the plant and sparked a fire that burned for two days.

“Additional investigation efforts are currently impeded due to the instability of the structure,” the release said.

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Fremont plant where explosion occurred faced workplace safety violations in 2012

JULIE ANDERSON
Omaha World-Herald

Federal officials in 2012 identified five safety violations during an inspection at a Fremont industrial plant where emergency responders continued searching Wednesday after three people went missing after an explosion and fire.

The Occupational Health and Safety Administration’s inspection of Horizon Biofuels, prompted by a safety complaint, resulted in \$12,000 in penalties initially but was reduced by informal settlements to \$6,000, according to agency records. All of the violations were marked as abated within two months.

Horizon Biofuels recycles discarded shipping pallets from local businesses, as well as waste lumber from building manufacturers, to produce wood pellets. The building was Golden Sun Feeds prior to Horizon moving in.

The World-Herald’s attempts to reach representatives of Horizon Biofuels so far have been unsuccessful.

The 2012 violations included a failure to ensure, either through processes or employee training, that equipment couldn’t be energized while employees were working on it, known as lockout/tagout procedures. Another involved failure to ensure that areas around working machinery were kept clean in order to prevent fire hazards. The report specifically noted that the employer had failed to ensure that wood dust did not accumulate around a milling machine.

Others involved failure to ensure employees were trained to use forklifts and to provide them with written information and training on hazardous chemicals, specifically a high-temperature grease.

The inspection was the only one on record for the company since

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