

**Statement of CSB Chairman John Bresland and
CSB Investigation Supervisor Don Holmstrom on ConAgra Explosion
June 18, 2009**

Mr. Bresland:

Thank you and welcome to this CSB news conference. The Chemical Safety Board is an independent federal agency established by Congress to investigate major chemical accidents and recommend safety improvements to prevent future accidents.

We are best known in North Carolina for our investigations of the dust explosion at West Pharmaceutical Services in Kinston in 2003, a chemical explosion in Morganton in 2006, and the hazardous waste fire that forced the evacuation of Apex, also in 2006.

Our investigations of these accidents have led to significant safety changes at both the federal and the state level. For example, six years after the West explosion, the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration, OSHA, announced that it is developing a new regulation to prevent combustible dust explosions ... this follows a CSB safety recommendation issued in 2006.

The accident last week at ConAgra was a terrible tragedy for Garner and for the entire region. Our hearts go out to the victims and their families, and to those who continue to suffer and struggle in hospitals.

I toured the explosion site yesterday along with our team, and I was very much struck by the scale of the explosion. As others have noted, it is easy to imagine how even more people could have been impacted by an accident of this magnitude. Around 100,000 square feet of the plant have been affected.

The CSB's mission is to prevent accidents like this from happening, and we do that by thoroughly determining the causes, issuing detailed public reports, and seeking changes to regulations, industry standards, and practices across the country.

The CSB is conducting a thorough, rigorous investigation of the accident here last week. This investigation will continue for many months, but we will strive to keep the public informed of our findings as we proceed. The public and the workforce at ConAgra are entitled to a clear explanation of exactly why this tragedy occurred.

I will now ask CSB Investigation Supervisor Don Holmstrom to describe what we have learned to date. Don?

Mr. Holmstrom:

Thank you Chairman Bresland. The CSB investigation team has been in place here since last Wednesday, the day after the explosion. We have had 4-8 investigators here

throughout that period. Yesterday we were joined by 2 additional experts in blast reconstruction who will be working closely with the team.

To date we have conducted about 120 witness interviews. A number of these were quite detailed and have produced useful information in helping us to understand what happened on June 9.

The southern end of the site remains extremely hazardous for personnel. Although we have visited the site, the areas of interest near the pump room remain dangerous and inaccessible.

As we proceed with the investigation, our goal is to correlate what we have learned from witness interviews with actual observation of the physical evidence that may lie buried inside the building. Attempting to do that safely will take a certain amount of time.

We do have an emerging understanding of what happened here on Tuesday. The company was in the process of installing and commissioning a new industrial-scale, gas-fired water heater. ConAgra hired various contractors to perform aspects of this work.

The heater was intended to supply hot water to the ConAgra plant for cleaning and other purposes. It was described as a large unit, about 8 feet tall by four and a half feet in diameter, and could operate on either natural gas or propane. It was located in the pump room, which is an interior room in the south end of the plant, in the packaging section.

To supply gas to the water heater, a new gas line several inches in diameter was installed between a gas main on the roof and the pump room. This installation was completed during the week before the accident.

On the morning of the accident, one of the contract firms -- which was the manufacturer of the water heater -- was working with ConAgra personnel to put the new gas line and heater into service. As part of that activity, the line was purged to remove air. The CSB is examining the possibility that gases inside the line were likely purged and vented directly into the pump room, in the interior of the building, leading to a flammable gas cloud and an explosion. Examination of the physical evidence may aid in this determination.

The ignition source for that explosion has not been determined, and may be difficult to identify.

A current focus of our investigation is to determine why flammable gas was released into the midst of an occupied building with about 100 people in the immediate vicinity. We will also be examining the appropriateness of locating the heater in the center of the building within a building structure that was susceptible to explosion damage.

Our team will be continuing to interview witnesses, review documents, and examine relevant standards governing these activities, including fire codes, insurance guidance,

and other industry standards. We will examine ConAgra's practices for the selection and safe management of contractors.

We know that at least one other flammable gas, ammonia, was present in the building and was released during the accident. Ammonia is both flammable and toxic, and we will continue to study the role of ammonia in this accident. Because of the quantity of hazardous ammonia stored and used at ConAgra, the process fell under the EPA Risk Management Program and the OSHA Process Safety Management standard.

During the response to the accident, it has been reported to the CSB that ammonia from the refrigeration system was discharged into local surface waters. Harmful levels of ammonia were later detected in a nearby creek, and we will be seeking to understand what impact that release may have had.

Finally, let me join Mr. Bresland in extending my condolences to the families of the victims and to the entire workforce, and to thank the Garner community for the kindness shown all of our team over the past week. Mr. Bresland?

Mr. Bresland:

Thank you, Don, for that update. Before we turn to questions, I do want to emphasize that there is a significant amount of work ahead to conduct the investigation as well as to rebuild the plant and the community. That work will proceed most efficiently with the cooperation of all parties, and so I urge the company and all the agencies that are involved to coordinate closely in preserving and providing evidence, and in protecting personnel at the site.

Our objective is that the handling of the site will be codified in an agreement among the CSB, the company, and North Carolina OSHA in the near future.

Thank you for coming today and we will be happy to field your questions.