

EDUCATION & LABOR COMMITTEE

Congressman George Miller, Chairman

Monday, June 28, 2010
Press Office, 202-226-0853

Rep. Courtney Statement at Forum on “Examining the Tragic Explosion at the Kleen Energy Power Plant in Middletown, Connecticut”

WASHINGTON, D.C. – *Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney (D-CT), for a forum on “Examining the Tragic Explosion at the Kleen Energy Power Plant in Middletown, Connecticut”*

I want to thank you all for agreeing to testify today about the tragic explosion in February at the Kleen Energy Power Plant in Middletown, Connecticut.

Six good men were killed as a result of this explosion, and at least fifty others were injured.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is currently investigating the blast.

So, OSHA is not testifying today because its inquiry has not been completed.

OSHA officials have informed me that OSHA expects to complete its investigation later in the summer, and we all look forward to learning what it has discovered and what actions it intends to take.

Our thoughts are with Ms. Thomas who will be testifying today about her husband Ron Crabb, and Carle Crabb, Ron Crabb’s brother, who I understand is in the audience today.

The Dobratz family is also here.

They lost Raymond Dobratz in the explosion.

My heart goes out to you and to others who lost loved ones at the Kleen Energy site in this senseless accident.

I want to welcome my Connecticut colleagues, Representatives Delauro, Larson and Murphy, all of whom are sitting with me on the dais today.

We are all making sure we take steps to prevent a similar explosion in the future.

This has been a tragic year for the American worker.

On April 2, a blast at the Tesoro oil refinery in Anacortes, Washington caused the deaths of seven workers who were engulfed in a "firewall."

So far in 2010, forty-seven miners in coal and metal/non-metal mines have been killed at work, higher than all the mining fatalities in 2009.

This includes the twenty-nine miners who were killed on April 5 when a massive explosion ripped through Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch mine in Montcoal, West Virginia.

As early as this week, we are introducing mine legislation that will help prevent a disaster of this magnitude from ever happening again.

On April 20, eleven workers were lost and seventeen injured following an explosion on the Trans-Ocean Deepwater Horizon drilling ship leased by BP in the Gulf of Mexico.

That disaster is tragic for the families of those eleven workers, and the spill is so enormous that the environmental and economic effects will be felt in the gulf region for years to come.

These accidents have a common thread—all of them were caused by methane or other flammable gasses, which were allowed to leak or build up to dangerous levels, and then exploded because they found ignition sources.

Aside from these more visible accidents, there are thousands of equally tragic deaths that occur in ones and twos, away from the limelight.

So we have our hands full.

Today we are examining the blast at Kleen Energy, and specifically the pipe cleaning procedure, known as a "gas blow" that caused the explosion.

When a natural gas power plant is built, piping must be installed to connect the turbines producing the energy with a natural gas pipeline.

The piping must be cleaned to remove any debris that could damage the turbines.

The cleaning is accomplished by forcing an element, such as natural gas, steam, air, nitrogen or water through the piping at a high pressure.

The Chemical Safety Board, an independent federal agency charged with investigating industrial chemical accidents, and represented here today, has been investigating the incident at Kleen Energy.

It has determined that using the “gas blow” procedure to accomplish the cleaning is “inherently dangerous” because the gas is highly flammable.

Air, steam or nitrogen are much safer and just as effective in removing the debris.

Despite safer alternatives, the use of natural gas is still popular.

Let me note that General Electric, which supplies most of the turbines to these plants---although not the one installed at Kleen Energy---is recommending that air blows and other alternatives to natural gas be used when cleaning the piping.

That is good because as unbelievable as this sounds, there is no law, regulation, standard or code—either in Connecticut or on the federal level--- that directly regulates the “gas blow” procedure in natural gas power plants.

This is especially troublesome because more and more power plants are being built each year.

We need to fix the problem, and the CSB has made urgent recommendations to OSHA and other organizations, such as the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), which issues voluntary consensus codes for industry to use to prevent fires and explosions.

We invited NFPA to testify here today, and it declined.

Based on NFPA’s recent rejection of even modest changes to its gas code, it is becoming increasingly doubtful whether the NFPA will follow CSB’s recommendations.

If those that are being asked to act, do not take action, Congress should move swiftly to protect workers at natural gas power plants from this dangerous procedure.

If we are going to send workers into harm’s way, we need to ensure that they are safe and healthy at work and return to their families each day.

Again thank you all so much for coming today and I look forward to your testimony.

###