

WEDNESDAY

Kentucky New Era.

June 29, 2011 | 75 cents, 51 cents average home delivery cost

WWW.KENTUCKYNEWERA.COM

20 pages, 2 sections | Volume 124, Number 229 | Hopkinsville, Ky. Est. 1869

APRIL TORNADO AT TGASK

State report conflicts with NWS account

No safety violations found

BY DAVE BOUCHER
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A state agency determined no safety violations occurred at a Hopkinsville plant in the time leading up to a tornado hitting the facility and injuring several workers.

The only sources cited in the report findings are TGASK personnel and

“the internet.”

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, through the Kentucky Labor Cabinet, started the investigation April 6 and completed it May 5. Susan Draper, director of occupational safety and compliance for the cabinet, told the New Era in April the organization tries to have investigations completed within six months.

“The inspector didn’t have to wait on other reports being done,” Draper said Tuesday in a phone interview. “It was just quick.”

On April 4 at approximately 12:04 p.m., an EF-2 tornado hit TGASK, according to the National Weather Service. Officials initially reported seven of the 184 employees were taken to the hospital. The report states six people were taken to the hospital.

The Pembroke Road facility manufactures rubber door and window

trim for cars.

Events before and after the tornado hit are recounted from the perspective of human resources manager Bill Doughman, plant manager Jessie McGuire and other unnamed employees. The inspector cites two employee interviews to suggest “there was no indication that anything ominous was about to occur” before the tornado hit. One employee said there was no wind or rain when that person came back from lunch and another said a supervisor went

outside and “observed nothing unusual.”

This is not unusual, said meteorologist Rick Shanklin, the warning coordination meteorologist for the National Weather Service at Paducah. He said tornadoes can sometimes be “wrapped” in a rain storm, making them hard to see until the last minute.

“That’s why it’s so important to heed the warnings,” Shanklin said.

Doughman, as human resources

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manager, is supposed to monitor a weather radio, according to TGASK's emergency action plan. Doughman states in the report he did monitor the radio that morning. He said the NWS only issued a warning for northern Christian County, and downgraded the alert to a watch before the tornado.

According to the NWS, a warning is issued when hazardous weather is occurring, imminent or has a very high probability of occurring. A watch is used when the risk of hazardous weather has increased significantly, but its occurrence, location, and/or timing is still uncertain.

Based on this information, Doughman did not initiate the emergency action plan, the report states.

Actually, there were five tornado warnings issued that day for parts of Christian County, Shanklin said. As reported in the New Era, a warning was issued for southern Christian County at 11:41 a.m., 23 minutes before the estimated time of the tornado impact at TGASK. Shanklin confirmed this alert area covers every part of the county south of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Pembroke Road. TGASK is south of that intersection.

"Technically that tornado warning covered the plant,"

Shanklin said, adding it was definitely disseminated over the weather radio.

Rotating clouds north of Fort Campbell and south of Hopkinsville were reported at 11:55 a.m., and another warning was made at 12:02 p.m. for southeastern Christian County, Shanklin said.

In the safety report, the Kentucky Labor Cabinet inspector "searched the internet" for alerts given around that time. The inspector found these alerts to be "overlapping and seemingly conflicting," and asserted the tornado prompted a tornado warning after the facility was hit.

David Powell, coordinator for the Christian County Weather Center, said it's common for warnings and watches to overlap as a storm system moves and changes. Warnings are also often issued after a tornado hits, Powell said, but they are for counties that could be in the storm's path.

He also remembers some of the areas mentioned in the alerts on April 4.

"It was specifically for South Christian because I was the one in the field that day, and that's what they radioed to me," Powell said.

Shanklin agreed with Powell about alert overlaps and warnings after a tornado hits. Although he did not think there was any "significant overlap"

on April 4, he said without overlap there could be places that are missed or given very little lead-up time to a storm.

Both stressed the importance of listening to warnings and getting the word out about storms as quickly as possible.

Shanklin also remembered a call from a man representing TGASK in the days following the tornado. He could not remember the man's name.

The labor cabinet inspector is identified as "S0130" in the investigation report. Draper declined to identify the inspector or make her available for an interview.

Using the TGASK testimony and the Internet searches, the inspector writes "it is not reasonable to conclude that the employer would establish a plan, train employees on the plan, and execute the plan during instances of severe weather; only to disregard the plan in this instance."

Draper said she did not know what Internet sources the inspector used to reach those conclusions. However, Draper said the inspector used the general investigation methods common to any inspection and that she was satisfied with the report.

A message left with Doughman was not returned by press time.

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