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REPORT ON A WORKSHOP ON AMMONIUM NITRATE ORGANIZED BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION AT ISPRA, ITALY (a)

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On 21st September, 2001 an explosion took place in a warehouse of a fertilizer plant (AZF in Toulouse, France). As obliged by law, the French government notified the Commission and requested immediate action. The Commission reacted quickly and organized an ammonium nitrate workshop in ISPRA, Italy in February this year.

The workshop was specifically convened to address concerns raised about current practice relating to the prevention of ammonium nitrate incidents, following this catastrophic incident where 30 people were killed and over 2,500 injured. The purpose of the workshop was to review existing theory and practices for preventing such incidents with a view to strengthening existing prevention practices and policies. Approximately 90 representatives of government and industry attended the workshop, representing over 20 different countries.

Experts from EFMA gave four presentations, the main purpose being to try to put things in a proper perspective. In a statement given by EFMA, it was stressed that,

“Although the cause of the explosion is not known yet, one fact is undisputed: ammonium nitrate fertilizer conforming with E.U. and French national legislation was NOT involved. The explosion rather involved material classified as off-spec., consisting of off-spec. low density/high porosity ammonium nitrate (technical grade), together with off-spec. high density/stabilised ammonium nitrate (fertilizer grade). Such off-spec. material which is not intended to enter the commercial supply chain as a straight nitrogen fertilizer needs to be clearly distinguished from ammonium nitrate fertilizer that is within specification”.

The outcome of the ISPRA workshop was the following:

The existing categories of ammonium nitrate and ammonium nitrate based fertilizers in the Seveso II (COMAH) directive should be reviewed with a view to particularly include “off-spec” material.

The Industry offered to issue a guidance document for handling and storage of “off-spec” material.

The industry, already in the process of up-dating the EFMA 1992 Handbook of Safe Storage and Handling of Ammonium Nitrate Based Fertilisers should also include “off-spec” material and should incorporate any causes and learning points from the Toulouse accident, should they ever become known. The Commission stressed that this exercise should have multi-stakeholder involvement and that there should be an emphasis on implementation.

This paper gives an overview of existing EU legislation for handling, transport and storage of ammonium nitrate based fertilizers and presents the recent changes made in, or proposed for, that legislation.

I will show how the Toulouse disaster has affected one piece of legislation, the COMAH Directive, and how it has led to certain collective initiatives from the West European Industry.

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