

# Accidents mar plastics firm's safety record

BY STEPHANIE GLASS  
OF THE HOUSTON POST STAFF

Three deaths and numerous safety violations at Formosa Plastics' \$1.3 billion chemical complex expansion at Point Comfort are raising questions and fears about the company's commitment to safety.

Some contractors — many of whom were hired because their companies bid the lowest — say Formosa's practice of demanding that they cut their costs even fur-

ther may be jeopardizing the well-being of the more than 2,000 construction workers.

"You've got these guys losing money and doing everything to stay alive," said a Houston contractor who has worked at the site in Calhoun County and would not allow his name to be used. "Safety is expensive. If you can get by without it, you take the risk. And if the contractor is already losing money, the tendency is to do that."

Moreover, the number of deaths and what federal safety officials

consider the "above average" number of safety offenses documented on-site has some residents questioning the quality of the final product.

"Building that in the middle of the community and school scares the hell out of me," said Diane Wilson, a longtime opponent of the plastics plant.

Though there are some questions about whether Formosa is ultimately responsible for the mistakes of workers whose employers have won contracts, Formosa

spokesman Joe Wyatt defends bidding practice.

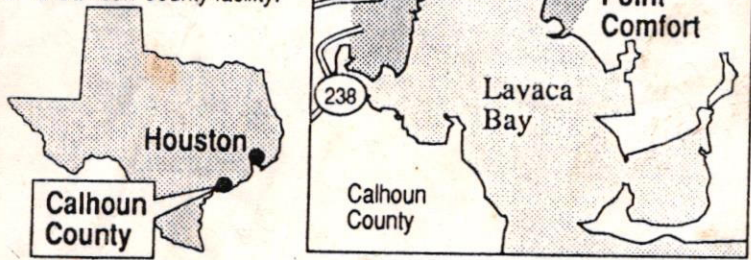
"We're going to attempt to get the lowest price. There are specifications written into contracts that have to be met. If the way (a contractor) gets his bid is to lower bid and cut corners, that is a problem," Wyatt said.

Plans for the company's expansion include seven chemical processing plants, a combination barge loading facility and tank farm.

Please see **FORMOSA**, A

## FORMOSA PLASTICS

Formosa Plastics is building a 960-acre, 32-plant expansion of its Calhoun County facility.



LeRoy Lottmann/The Houston Post

## FORMOSA: Accidents mar safety record of plastics firm

From A-31

and a utility plant.

Since construction began on the 960-acre site Jan. 3, 1990, three workers have died in separate accidents:

□ Reymundo Martinez, 32, of Mercedes and an employee of Alex Erectors of Houston, last March was plugging in bolts and nuts 28 feet above a concrete floor when he unsnapped his safety belt to move to another location. Martinez slipped on the beam he was walking on and fell.

□ Martin Solis, 27, of Victoria, was guiding a bucket of concrete in light drizzle along with some other workers in August of last year. Solis was fatally struck by lightning.

□ Pamela Guthrie Villareal, 28, of Point Comfort, was driving a tractor after a rain in July of 1990. The tractor flipped to one side, Guthrie fell under and was crushed.

In the first case, Altex was fined \$900 for, among other things, instructing employees how to open safety cords to pass beams or keep them short for workers before they hit the

Baker Concrete of Houston, Solis' employer, received \$2,970 in fines for, in part, not telling workers of the hazard of pouring concrete as an electrical storm approached.

In Villareal's case, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration fined her employer, Rocky's Excavating, for not verifying whether she had any experience driving a tractor.

The fatalities automatically triggered three massive investigations from OSHA.

The first two investigations — consisting of an audit of each contractor's safety practices — ended with OSHA handing out a total of more than 220 citations and assessing more than \$56,000 in fines.

After the third death, OSHA returned to the site, armed with higher penalties mandated by Congress that were effective March 1, 1991.

Inspectors cited 61 contractors — many of them cited previously — for more than 250 violations and dispensed \$343,000 in fines. Inspectors are still handing them out from that investigation.

The slew of violations and fines

"I'm not paying any of them. I'm not guilty of any of them," said a major contractor at the site who said he planned to appeal all of his citations and several thousand dollars in fines. "There is no possible way for OSHA to walk on to a job without giving you something."

Formosa officials say they have taken measures to ensure a safe workplace and blame the high number of citations on smaller local companies who are not experienced in dealing with OSHA.

Wyatt said the company had six safety inspectors who continually checked on contractors' safety practices. To date, he said, they have handed out more than 250 warnings and dismissed 12 contractor supervisors from the site.

"I think our oversight is good," Wyatt said. "I think we have a department that is doing oversight making every effort to assure a safe workplace."

Wyatt admitted they do not check to see if contractors have bad safety records.

"Do we go back and check a contractor's past violations? No. I don't think any person does that. Because if a person is in business and has a background of completing jobs, that is basic," he said.

Randy Smith, Formosa's director of maintenance, said contractors don't get full pay if work is substandard.

"I've got about 28 people that go across all disciplines and their primary function is to check all work against specifications and quality of work done," Smith said.

The question of safety is also being raised with regard to the scheduling nightmares that have resulted from the sheer magnitude of the job and Formosa's role as its own general contractor.

"Contractors were basically on top of each other," said one project manager whose foreman relayed to him conditions at the site. "Some times they'd be working on a tank and people would be putting up pipe around them," which should be done one at a time.

"One, that slows progress, and two, that can get unsafe," he said. That feeling is not universal among the 260 contractors who have worked at the site.

"It's like any job site at the peak of its activity period," said Dennis Hirschfeld of Hirschfeld Steel Co. in San Angelo. "It does present enormous scheduling problems. Sure does."