

CASE STUDY: CATASTROPHIC INCIDENT INVESTIGATION



The Client

A privately held pulp and paper mill located in northeastern United States. The mill employed more than 500 workers at the time of the explosion, with approximately 175 working at the time of the incident.

The Situation

In 2020, during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, an explosion at the client's pulp and paper mill shook the ground and produced a plume of black smoke that was visible for miles. Minor injuries reported were respiratory issues from dust and debris. The process-related explosion involved a large pressure vessel failure which destroyed a building, large parts of adjacent buildings as well as the facility infrastructure.

The IFO Group was retained by the facility owner

to manage the investigation as a turnkey project. Upon arrival, investigators found that the critical evidence was located more than 130 feet in the air at the end of the failed pressure vessel which was also leaning into the process building at 58-degree angle. The process building had to be precisely deconstructed in phases to safely recover the critical evidence needed to prove causation and responsibility of the subrogation parties. Additionally, it was found that asbestos and other hazardous materials were scattered throughout the site. IFO Group created a remediation plan and executed to manage these environmental risks throughout the investigation project.

Key Aspects Considered

- Will the investigation be managed as privileged work?
- Do any of the proposed outside law firms, investigators, experts, or laboratories have potential conflicts of interest?
- Clear scoping of the investigation
- Identification of needed internal and external resources – budget, staffing, and equipment
- Evidence collection, management, and retention protocols
- Regulatory stakeholder management and communication

Steps Taken

Once onsite, IFO Group experts assumed responsibility for the scene from the initial emergency responders. We immediately secured the perimeter and began searching for critical evidence. We focused on interviewing witnesses and coordinating the investigation and recovery efforts with OSHA, the State Fire Marshall, and other regulatory agencies. Longer term, we managed the controlled demolition of the area where the incident occurred and collected the critical evidence needed to prove the cause of the incident.

The IFO Group coordinated and managed the investigative interactions with more than a dozen different external stakeholders including city, state, and federal regulatory agencies, subrogation parties, and insurers. Throughout this project, more than thirty investigators and engineering support staff played key roles during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Outcome

IFO Group efforts enabled the client to fully recover the value of the loss from their insurer and satisfied the needs of interested regulatory agencies while preserving the ability of the insurer to pursue subrogation claims. The investigation was completed within seven months and the client collected a nine-figure settlement from the insurer due to investigation efforts. All site work was completed without a first aid case reported.

- ✓ Investigation completed within 7 months
- ✓ Client collected a 9-figure financial settlement from insurer because of investigation efforts
- ✓ Site work was completed without a first aid case reported