

The cost of complacency

If there is one lesson that emerges in the wake of last month's conclusion to the 2005 Buncefield disaster prosecution, it surely is the importance of vigilance. And that applies to all plants, not just to those in the chemicals, oil and gas industries that may be subject to the COMAH (Control of Major Accident Hazards) regulations.

Not that any of the firms found guilty by St Albans Crown Court is likely to be reeling from the effects of the £9.5 million handed down in fines. The word 'derisory' cannot adequately convey the disdain for that figure of those affected, supposed, as it is, to mete out just punishment for the UK's most expensive industrial incident ever. Estimates by the HSE put the cost to the community at more than £1 billion – not only for the huge emergency response, but also the subsequent clean-up operation.

No: the issues are the scale of long-term pollution damage caused and how very much worse – in terms of injuries and fatalities – this explosion and fire so easily could have been. Anyone reading the reports from the Buncefield investigation or the court records cannot fail to be struck by the incredible luck of those on and around the site that day. And, equally, by the staggering complacency, on the part of those responsible, over critical safety equipment, maintenance, investment and procedures.

BP's current financial woes, following the Deepwater Horizon oil rig disaster, in which 11 people lost their lives and 17 were seriously injured, demonstrate how much more injurious an accident can be. Months after that explosion, BP has recorded one of the biggest ever quarterly losses in UK history (£11 billion), its CEO has been ousted and the Gulf of Mexico is battling against the effects of oil pollution on an almost unprecedented scale. And, while the trial by Senate and media has been visceral, formal investigations and retribution are yet to come – although BP's board says it's confident that gross negligence will not be the verdict.

Returning to Buncefield, the investigation by the HSE and Environment Agency revealed a series of serious failings that led to thousands of gallons of petrol being released and exploding. Mr Justice Calvert-Smith said the firms prosecuted had shown "a slackness, inefficiency and a more or less complacent attitude to safety".

In these hard times, it is easy to understand – although not to excuse – how plant managers anywhere might put off, say, purchasing new equipment, or reduce the frequency of maintenance, or even relax their grip on risk management. But if any of us thinks proper equipment and safety procedures are expensive, consider the consequences and cost of an industrial accident – and stay vigilant.

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