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# Chemical safety agency that Trump wants to eliminate begins investigation of Texas plant explosion

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By **Chris Mooney** August 31

An unfolding crisis at a flooded chemical plant outside Houston on Thursday led to the prompt announcement of an investigation by a federal body that President Trump would eliminate.

The administration's proposed budget would wind down funding for the Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board, a small, independent federal agency tasked with investigating chemical accidents.

But with that budget still only a proposal, the board announced an investigation of the fires at the Arkema chemical plant in Crosby, Texas Thursday afternoon.

"We have made requests of them to provide many documents on a variety of different topics," board chairperson Vanessa Allen Sutherland said, noting that it was not yet possible for investigators to deploy to the site. "We will be looking forward to getting those as soon as possible."

The board, which has a budget of \$11 million and 40 staff, played a major part in investigating the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and has conducted more than 130 investigations since its began operations in 1998. It originated as part of a set of 1990 amendments to the Clean Air Act.

It comes in to determine what happened after accidents and disasters — much like the National Transportation Safety Board, said Elgie Holstein, senior director for strategic planning with the Environmental Defense Fund.

“Would we ever do away with that group that looks at aircraft accidents after they’ve occurred, or train accidents after they’ve occurred, the NTSB?” asked Holstein. “No. So why would we be getting rid of the Chemical Safety Board, which does the same thing?”

The Trump budget proposes doing away with the safety board “as part of the Administration’s plans to move the Nation towards fiscal responsibility and to redefine the proper role of the Federal Government.”

The body has seen its share of controversy. Its former chairman, Rafael Moure-Eraso, resigned in 2015 after a congressional investigation into charges of an “abusive and hostile work environment.”

Mathy Stanislaus, a former official of the Environmental Protection Agency’s Office of Land and Emergency Development, acknowledged the board is in need of reform.

But he said: “I think that capacity is necessary to do that kind of deep, independent analysis” in the wake of a chemical accident. “Eliminating it makes no sense at all.”

Sutherland said on the press call Thursday that the board’s investigation of the Arkema plant explosion could determine whether regulatory shortcomings contributed to the disaster.


“It’s part of the comprehensive root cause review and analysis that our investigators will conduct,” she said.

Previously, signaling the agency’s independence, she had issued a statement criticizing the administration’s plans to get rid of the board.

“Our recommendations have resulted in banned natural gas blows in Connecticut, an improved fire code in New York City, and increased public safety at oil and gas sites across the state of Mississippi,” Sutherland said. “The CSB has been able to accomplish all of this with a small and limited budget.”

*Juliet Eilperin contributed to this report.*

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