Hurricane Safety – Evacuation Fatality File



Tennessee plastics factory staff killed in Hurricane Helene reportedly told not to evacuate

One worker said Impact Plastics managers would not let employees leave, which the company denies.

Several employees at a plastics factory in eastern Tennessee were killed during Hurricane Helene or are missing, amid warnings that the storm's current death toll of more than 130 is likely to rise substantially as subsiding floodwaters allow rescuers to search through the wreckage.

Impact Plastics confirmed there had been fatalities at its plant in Erwin but did not say how many people had been killed. The company said there were missing and deceased employees as well as a contractor.

Officials have said at least 130 people across five states in the south-eastern US have been killed as a result of Helene, which thrashed ashore in Florida's Big Bend region late Thursday.

Jacob Ingram, a mold changer at the company, told the Knoxville News Sentinel that, as the flooding started, managers instructed employees to move their cars away from the rising water – but would not let them leave. "They should've evacuated when we got the flash flood warnings, and when they saw the parking lot," he said to the newspaper. "When we moved our cars, we should've evacuated then … we asked them if we should evacuate, and they told us not yet, it wasn't bad enough. "And by the time it was bad enough, it was too late – unless you had a four-wheel drive."

Ingram told the Knoxville News Sentinel that he and 10 other employees later tried to leave by taking refuge on an open-bed truck. Debris hit the truck, made two people fall into the water, and eventually caused the truck to flip.

Fernando Ruiz told NBC News he spoke with his mother as she worked while the rain fell. He said he urged her to leave – but she replied that managers weren't telling them anything as the flooding worsened.

The company denied that managers had told employees not to leave.

“When water began to cover the parking lot and the adjacent service road, and the plant lost power, employees were dismissed by management to return to their homes in time for them to escape the industrial park,” it said in a statement. “At no time were employees told that they would be fired if they left the facility. For employees who were non-English speaking, bilingual employees were among the group of managers who delivered the message.”

The company also said: “While most employees left immediately, some remained on or near the premises for unknown reasons.”

The company’s founder, Gerald O’Connor, said in a statement: “We are devastated by the tragic loss of great employees. Those who are missing or deceased and their families are in our thoughts and prayers.”

One of the employees who died was 56-year-old Bertha Mendoza, according to the News Sentinel. She was separated from her sister while trying to stay afloat, said a GoFundMe set up by her family.

Source: *Theguardian.com*