

Recollections of Buncefield 10 Years on.

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On the morning of 11 December, 2005 I recall switching on the BBC news to be greeted with the appalling sight of the fire and explosions at the Buncefield Terminal. Like many others, understanding the event and striving to ensure it never happened again became my pre-occupation for the following years.

Once all the initial response had settled down my first task for HSE was to check that none of the other 120 or so fuel storage depots in the UK were likely to give rise to a similar gasoline tank overfilling. I was quite concerned about the wide variation that existed at the time in the integrity of the overfilling control measures on large gasoline tanks. So the fitting of high-integrity overfill protection became the main focus of the HSE – Industry Task Group set up in response. This joint working to achieve a common goal of improved risk control changed the way the regulator and industry related to each other. I am pleased to say this more open and focussed relationship still remains today. So this, for me, is the most potent and lasting legacy from this tragic incident.

As for the underlying causes – I'm not so sure everyone in the major hazard sector across the world has grasped the importance of top to bottom alertness and focus on process safety management, strong leadership and measuring the performance of critical control measures. Many in the UK have and it's very pleasing to see the work gone into increasing the awareness on leadership and major hazard risks. But look elsewhere around the world, and more worrying even in many developed countries, and process safety and preventing loss of containment of hazardous material still seems to be a difficult issue to grasp. The recent US Chemical Safety Board, CSB, report on the Caribbean Petroleum Fire illustrates how much has still to be learnt about safe storage of flammable liquids.

So my worry is that failure to learn the lessons of Buncefield and the countless other major incidents that have occurred in the last few decades continues to be the ongoing anthem within the chemical and major hazard industries across the globe.