

Safety agency slammed over propane blast

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Employees of Environmental Consulting & Occupational Health Management Inc. pick up possible debris from Sunday's Sunrise Propane explosion on the grounds of nearby Ancaster Park off Katherine Rd. on Aug. 14, 2008.

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Large propane facilities across Ontario will face greater scrutiny in the wake of Sunday's deadly explosion in Downsview, promises Consumer Minister Harinder Takhar.

In a face-to-face meeting yesterday, Takhar blasted the brass of the private agency that monitors propane operators and demanded increased inspections of places like the doomed Sunrise Propane.

"I was disappointed in how they have been communicating with the public," he told the *Star*. "I would expect them to put out information that people can rely upon."

He spoke a day after the Technical Standards and Safety Authority, which implements provincial law on handling of propane, issued a mistake-riddled list mapping the location of large facilities, including one in Toronto that didn't exist, another that was a townhouse development, and one in Keswick that was sold a decade ago.

Takhar said he has given the arm's-length agency until Monday to compile a proper tally of propane facilities and until Tuesday to deliver "an inspection plan" of all large propane depots

in Ontario similar to Sunrise.

"This has to be over and above what their plans are for the year. They have to take their responsibilities seriously," the minister said.

"They got that message very clear."

The TSSA, created in the mid-1990s by the Progressive Conservatives, is required to inspect the propane tank filling facilities of various sizes – 337 in the GTA, 1,708 in the province, according to the flawed list – every three years. Operators also must do annual self-inspections.

Though the cause of the blast is not yet known – nor whether beefed-up inspections could have prevented it – Takhar said the moves could only improve public safety.

During a private one-hour meeting in his Queen's Park office, Takhar said he read the riot act to TSSA board chair Rudy Riedl and president and CEO Kathy Milsom.

"I told them what my expectations are, going forward. They have to provide a reliable, accurate, timely list of all sites ... by physically going there. Not looking at the phonebook."

That was a reference to the fact it took a *Toronto Star* reporter just two or three hours of driving around on Wednesday to find major flaws in the TSSA's list.

Yesterday, an official with Superior Propane, which holds nearly half of the country's propane market, said the TSSA's list included a pair of mistakes on its facilities – a Keele St. location sold in 2006 and one in Keswick sold 10 years ago.

"This calls into question everything they do," Brian Patterson, president of the Ontario Safety League, said yesterday. "How could you lose track of a place with thousands of litres of propane you've said could be there and are supposed to be inspecting?"

Though critics have been saying it's time to turn the TSSA's responsibilities back to public hands, Takhar insisted he was keeping his mind open on the agency.

Members of the propane industry have said repeatedly that they will work with authorities to implement any rule changes that may come about as a result of the investigation of the Sunrise blast.

The TSSA has been under fire increasingly since Sunday, first about its inability to identify a list of locations of similar facilities, then about the frequency of required inspections. The outcry intensified yesterday when inaccuracies showed up on the list finally released Wednesday. Monte Kwinter, MPP for York Centre and minister of community safety, called it "extremely concerning" at a meeting held by the Ancaster Ratepayers Association last night.

A TSSA official said a corrected list could be available by today, and the erroneous list is "absolutely not" a sign the organization doesn't know where they're located.

"We acknowledge the limitations of the list as it existed at that point in time," said spokesperson Dave Lisle. "But certainly that's no indication ... that we do not have either the capacity, knowledge or expertise to deliver on our safety commitment.

"We're very confident we know what sites need to be inspected."

In fact, records show that in addition to a 2005 inspection before Sunrise opened, TSSA officials visited the Wilson Ave. and Keele St. facility in 2006 and 2007. The company was issued with "cease and desist" orders two years ago for technical violations.

Lisle said it was "not uncommon" for companies to be told to stop doing certain things but be allowed to continue operating.

With files from Nicole Baute