Toxic gas accidentally released last week

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GEISMAR — A toxic gas accidentally was released into the atmosphere above an Ascension Parish chemical plant last week, plant officials confirmed Monday.

About 50 pounds of phosgene gas escaped from a storage tank at the BASF Corp. plant here last Wednesday while workers were preparing the tank for routine maintenance, plant Manager Les Story said.

“It was a minor leak,” he said. No one was injured and the gas dissipated inside the plant.

“There was not even a single exposure,” he said.

However, the release was significant enough for plant officials to activate the Geismar Area Mutual Aid emergency response network, Story said.

Sheriff’s deputies inspected the area for evidence of the potentially deadly gas. However, the gas did not travel outside the plant grounds and no one in surrounding communities was affected by the release, Story said.

The release occurred about 7:45 a.m. while workers were preparing to add some instrumentation to a 5,000-gallon storage tank, he said.

“We were emptying a storage tank in preparation for maintenance,” he said. The tank was purged to eliminate trace amounts of phosgene.

“There was a small amount of phosgene remaining in the tank,” he said. The material dissipated quickly and posed no hazard to the community, he said.

Story said phosgene is an intermediate chemical used to produce other chemical products at the BASF plant, including methylene diisocyanate and toluene diisocyanate.

Story said the chemical release at his plant was unusual because a large quantity of the gas escaped. “When we have a release it’s usually much smaller.”

A chemical workers union has charged that the BASF plant is operated recklessly by poorly trained and inexperienced contract workers.

About 370 members of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union, Local 4-620, were locked out of the plant in a contract dispute with the company nearly two years ago.

OCAW union members have charged that the BASF plant has been plagued with safety problems since they were replaced by a temporary workforce in June 1984.