

Last week's larger, more deadly explosion

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

April 23, 2013

Yesterday I heard the NPR news desk transition from its top story, Boston, to the latest from West, Texas. Here's how they did it: "Let's check in on another major story that dominated our attention last week."

That's not quite how I remember it. I don't think the ammonia-fertilizer plant explosion in small-town Texas dominated the news media's attention even when the story first broke Wednesday. It was almost entirely overshadowed by the marathon bombing—even though both tragedies centered on horrific explosions, even though both included powerful stories of [volunteers helping out at great risk to themselves](#), even though more people died in Texas.

Even though the industrial accident in West—unlike the low-tech violence of two murderous young men—could have been prevented.

It's still not clear which type of ammonia fertilizer caused the explosion. [Maybe](#) the initial fire and the water used to fight it produced just the right circumstances to set off the plant's large quantity of anhydrous ammonia. Or maybe the problem was the more volatile substance ammonium nitrate, which the plant was storing a lot of as recently as last year—and which [it failed to report to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security](#).

In any case, this failure to report was not West Fertilizer Company's only problem. [Its history with regulatory bodies](#) reveals the story: multiple violations cited by a hodgepodge of regulators that didn't coordinate with one another, didn't inspect the plant very often, and weren't able to impose more than a slap on the wrist when they did. On OSHA's last visit, it fined the plant all of \$30 for improperly storing anhydrous ammonia. That was in 1985—which would be astonishing were it not for the fact that [the woefully underfunded regulator visits workplaces an average of once every 99 years](#).

I was glad to see law enforcement assuring the public that the marathon bombers would be found and brought to justice, and I was relieved to see them succeed. But it's sad that we don't see comparable

resources or resolve when it comes to protecting the public from the well-known threats of industrial accidents.

Of course, we Americans are obsessed with terrorism and fighting it. (As [Michael Cohen observes](#), even other recent manhunts for murderers haven't gotten this level of attention from either the authorities or the media.) When it comes to enforcing and strengthening regulations, we're indifferent at best. Some Americans (including [plenty of Texans](#)) even seem to think regulation is by definition a bad thing.

Tell it to the people in West, where a volatile plant went under-inspected for years. Where a huge quantity of [repurposed weaponized chemicals](#) was allowed to sit until finally it exploded in a deadly fireball. Where toothless safety regulations left a company with little incentive to comply.

This didn't have to happen. Do we care enough to keep it from happening again?