Elevator explosion a memory but challenges continue.

A year ago, Ed Foster awakened to a ringing phone and was told the All Points Cooperative grain elevator had exploded.

The CEO of All Points Cooperative in Gothenburg found himself trying to gather as much information as quickly as possible.

“Were there fatalities or injuries and where and how do we go from here?” Foster said he was thinking Nov. 20, 2008, after grain dust detonated at 3:15 a.m.

The explosion rocked much of the sleeping city.

“I had no idea of what to expect when I drove downtown,” he said.

Determining damage to the elevator was difficult as fires continued to flare in the weeks following the blast.

But before rebuilding, workers had to tear out the mangled remains of the head house, Foster said.

“There were guys working on top in subzero temperatures with jackhammers and cutting torches,” he explained. “It all had to be removed by hand.”

Gothenburg fire chief Mark Ballmer, who is also vice president of agronomy at All Points, said the explosion that blew up the center of the elevator was caused by grain dust but the source of ignition was never determined.

Ballmer said the biggest thing All Points has had to overcome is operation of the business with ongoing construction.

“The explosion took the heart of our elevator where all the grain we handled needed to flow through,” he said. “Due to the volume we handle, not being able to move grain by rail was huge.”

The area damaged by the explosion contained high capacity legs, distribution equipment, screeners and all the equipment that loaded and weighed rail cars.

In the last month, Ballmer said enough equipment has been installed to allow the shipment of grain by rail again.

Until then and after the explosion, grain received was shipped out by semi-trucks.

Cool and rainy weather throughout the year caused delays as crews reconstructed the inside and outside of the elevator.

For example, the inside of silos needed to be lined with concrete.

“Even with little sprinkles of rain, the concrete crew had to stop,” Foster said.

Steve Costello , vice president of the grain division, pointed out that relining reduced the elevator’s 3.5 million-bushel storage capacity by only 30,000 bushels.

Included in the reconstruction plan was the addition of a more technologically advanced computer system that controls all elevator operations.

Before the explosion, Costello said they had only partial control.

“If there’s a problem now, the system automatically shuts down,” he said.

Foster likened much of the reconstruction to assembling a puzzle.

“Some of it had to be put in place to make sure it fit before a second piece could be built,” he explained.

Other obstacles were the small fires that continued to burn inside the elevator for about three months after the explosion.

On Feb. 10, fire fighters returned to extinguish a flare up caused by the salvage crew removing damaged grain that ignited.

The fire damaged part of a conveyor belt.

Foster said they are still gathering information about damage for the insurance company.

At this point, they know damage to equipment ranges from $6 to $8 million not counting loss of business.

As the one-year anniversary of the explosion nears, Costello said All Points officials “learned all kinds of educational stuff we don’t want to learn again.”

On a more serious note, he said “you’re no better than your employees.”

“They have done such a good job getting us through this,” Costello said. “We’ve also got a good group of farmers who have been cooperative as much as they can.”

For Costello, the challenges have been never ending as All Points tries to service patrons the best it can,” he said.

All three officials noted that the community and its farmers, the City of Gothenburg, the fire department, the railroad and the state department of roads were very cooperative after the explosion.

“Everybody asked what we needed,” Costello said.

Foster, Costello and Ballmer were also amazed there weren’t fatalities from the explosion.

”If it would have taken place during business hours in the middle of harvest, there is no question in my mind we would have had loss of life,” Ballmer said. “You can fix concrete and steel but you can’t replace that.”

One employee who was operating the elevator when the blast occurred escaped through a door of the main elevator.

Larry Moses, superintendent of the elevator, suffered burns to his face and was transported to the hospital and later to a Lincoln burn center.

After recovering, Moses returned to work at the elevator.

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