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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6175

BETTINA POIRIER, MAJORITY STAFF DIRECTOR
ZAK BAIG, REPUBLICAN STAFF DIRECTOR

July 9, 2013

Dear Governor:

I want to bring to your attention the threats posed by the improper handling of ammonium nitrate. I trust you will agree with me that we must ensure that all available measures are used to prevent explosions of this dangerous chemical, which recently caused the deaths of 14 people in West, Texas. Ensuring proper controls on ammonium nitrate can be lifesaving.

On June 27, 2013, I held an oversight hearing in the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works to look not only into the explosion in West, but also one in Louisiana and California.

During the course of our hearing, we learned from a Texas witness, Dr. Sam Mannan, that the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration has had regulations in place for decades that require controls on the storage of ammonium nitrate.

Ammonium nitrate can explode when it is heated or contaminated and threatens the lives of first responders and people in communities located near facilities that handle this material. In West, in addition to the 14 deaths, hundreds of people were injured, and homes, businesses, and three unoccupied schools were damaged or destroyed.

I urge you to review the applicable requirements in your state, and in the interests of saving lives, adopt policies that you believe will prevent loss of life while allowing the use of ammonium nitrate with appropriate protections or the use of alternatives.

Chemical explosions can have tragic consequences, but best practices can prevent disasters. One of the most moving moments at the hearing were the words of Tim White, the brother-in-law of a firefighter lost at West, Texas. He wrote a letter proposing that we review and change as necessary policies related to the handling of ammonium nitrate. He said, "The profound impact of this tragedy continues to affect our family daily and while the changes proposed here will not bring Kevin back to us, they will help ensure that other families and our country do not experience this type of tragedy again."

We should take these words to heart.

Do not hesitate to contact me if I can be of further help.

Sincerely,

Barbara Boxer
Chairman