

**StarTribune.com** | MINNEAPOLIS - ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

## **Minnesotan one of 4 dead in sewer line accident in Superior, Wis.**

**Toxic fumes are believed to have killed four workers whose bodies were pulled from a 20-foot deep well near a blacktop demolition company, authorities said.**

**By Brian Bakst**, Associated Press

Last update: November 02, 2007 – 10:18 AM

SUPERIOR, Wis. — Toxic fumes are believed to have killed four workers whose bodies were pulled from a 12-foot-deep sewer line near a landfill, authorities said.

Battalion Fire Chief Richard Rugg said rescuers recovered the bodies Thursday night. Two of the victims are believed to be employees of the company that owns the landfill and the other two were contractors working with them, authorities said.

The Douglas County, Wis., sheriff said two men, in their late 30s to mid 40s, were from Douglas County, another was from Minnesota and the hometown of the fourth is not yet known.

Sheriff Tom Dalbec said three of the four men who died in were trying to rescue the others when they were overcome by toxic fumes.

Dalbec said one of the workers was trying to repair a pump or clear a blockage in the sewer line late yesterday when he was overcome by hydrogen sulfide fumes.

Dalbec says another worker went down the 12-foot deep manhole to try to rescue the other, then the third went down to help and then the fourth. All were overcome by the fatal fumes.

Another worker discovered the four men and called 911. The sheriff says all were dead when they were recovered from the sewer hole last night.

"They were either down in the manhole trying to clear a blockage or they were going down to repair a pump in the bottom of the manhole," said Dalbec, who said he believes they died one after another as each went down to help.

"First one goes down and is overcome by gas and drops or falls, and the second one looking down from above sees the first one, figures he can go down to rescue. Same thing happens to him, the third one same thing and fourth one same thing happens."

He said he expected to release more information after he meets late this morning with officials from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

A sign near the site identified the business as Lakehead Blacktop Demolition Landfill.

Joseph Kimmes II, the founder of J. Kimmes Construction, which owns Lakehead

Blacktop Materials Landfill, said one of the victims was his son.

The 71-year-old father, fighting back tears, said he was unsure exactly what happened.

"I have heard so many different stories," he said. "I don't think they were working down there. Something else happened."

Four of his sons took over the company in 2005, Kimmes said. The company was founded in 1989.

The accident happened in a "big collection tank" that held drainage and leached water from the landfill, he said. The water collected in the tank eventually gets pumped into the city sewer system, he said.

The landfill was for demolition products, such as when buildings were torn down, Kimmes said. No garbage or hazardous materials were hauled to the landfill, he said.

Douglas County authorities received a call at about 5:30 p.m. that there were people in the sewer line. Fire Chief Tad Matheson said the line contained water and hydrogen sulfide fumes, which commonly are released with sewer products.

The victims apparently were overcome, he said, although autopsies would have to be done to determine the cause of their deaths.

"They had a heavy enough toxic atmosphere that they would be overcome by the fumes, but there was water down" in the sewer, Matheson said.

Hydrogen sulfide gas is poisonous, flammable and colorless and gives off a strong odor of rotten eggs, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. At high concentrations, people can lose the ability to smell it, making it extremely dangerous. Brief exposure to high concentrations can cause difficulty breathing and loss of consciousness.

Firefighters with breathing equipment led the recovery effort, and workers pumped water out to help.

Since the gas is heavier than air, it would stay below ground, Matheson said. The victims were believed to have died before rescuers arrived, he said.

Dalbec said the sewer hole is in the village of Superior in northwestern Wisconsin.

The village is about 150 miles north of Minneapolis and has a population of 500 people. It is adjacent to the city of Superior, a port city that has a population of about 27,000.

---

Associated Press writers Robert Imrie in Wausau, Wis., and Gretchen Ehlke in Milwaukee contributed.

