

SPECIAL REPORT: EXPLOSION IN WEST

'It's tough. All these guys we have known all of our lives.'

Steve Vanek, West's mayor pro tem, member of the Fire Department

DEATH TOLL CLIMBS TO 14



A sign made of duct tape beckons motorists along Interstate 35 in West on Friday, two days after a massive fertilizer plant explosion. Victims' names had not been released by late Friday, but family and friends identified several of the dead. CHARLIE RIEDEL / ASSOCIATED PRESS

Nine medics, volunteer firefighters killed; as many as 60 people still unaccounted for.

By Tony Plohetski
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WEST – As search teams continued to comb through a swath of wreckage left by Wednesday night's fertilizer plant explosion, authorities confirmed Friday that 14 people, including nine medics and volunteer firefighters, died in the blast.

Two brothers and the city secretary – all volunteer firefighters – were among the dead, according to leaders in this farming town north of

Waco. Victims' names had not been released by late Friday, but family and friends identified several of those who died.

Officials, including U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said as many 60 people remained

West continued on **A15**



Volunteers unload donated goods at the WestFest grounds Friday for residents in need. PHOTOS BY RON T. ENNIS / FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

5-block blast zone still closed to residents

West
Continued from A1

unaccounted for, but the town's mayor and a top county official said in a Friday evening news conference that authorities expected to find most of those people in coming days at hospitals, motels and the homes of relatives and friends.

The number of missing "is a little deceiving," Mayor Tommy Muska said. "We have a lot of displaced people." Federal, state and local authorities continued an investigation into what led to the massive explosion at the West Fertilizer Co. Also Friday, Donald Adair, the owner of the company, released a statement expressing sympathy to the families of those who died and who lost their homes and other property in the blast.

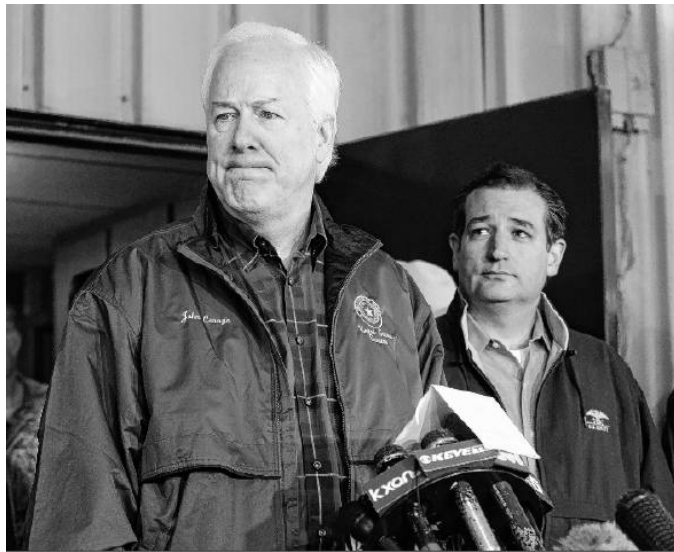
"This tragedy will continue to hurt deeply for generations to come," the statement said. Officials have said that on Wednesday, about five volunteer firefighters responded to a blaze at the plant at 7:29 p.m. and immediately began evacuating the area. About 20 minutes later, an explosion sent flames and a huge cloud into the air, destroying nearby homes and buildings.

Cornyn, in a news conference, said he was provided with the number of unaccounted-for residents from the state deputy fire marshal and Texas Task Force members who are helping with search-and-rescue missions. He later told a smaller group of reporters, "I would take (that number) with a grain of caution."

"We need to find out that they are safe and still alive," Cornyn said.

Betty Tucker, the owner of West Terrace Apartments, badly damaged in the blast, said Friday morning that several residents were still not accounted for at the 22-unit apartment complex. They included a woman who she estimates is about 65 years old and a man who is about 50. Tucker said her family knows one of the emergency workers searching for victims and "he said I'll call you as soon as I know something, and he hasn't called."

The five-block blast zone was still off-limits to residents and reporters on Friday. Officials said it's possible that some residents might be able to begin returning home as early as Saturday.



Get complete coverage of the West plant explosion, including photos, videos and information on how you can help, at statesman.com.

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"It's tough," Vanek said. "All these guys we have known all of our lives."

Asked Friday how it became apparent that the department had lost firefighters, Vanek said, "Common sense. If you would have seen it, you would have known."

The department lost three of its five fire vehicles and was

working with the Texas Municipal League, which insures the property, to replace them.

Texas Gov. Rick Perry, who spent Friday in the town, said the state would send firefighters from across Texas to West to provide fire protection and to relieve exhausting and grieving members of the Fire Department.

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including Texas Farm Bureau and Allstate, set up mobile claim processing centers throughout the town.

Bobby Hurst, 72, who lives within the blast zone, said he rushed out of his home after the explosion amid fears of a second blast. He hasn't been back.

"I've been ready," he said. He said he wants to meet with insurance adjusters, but "we can't do anything until we get in there and see about it."

Hurst said he knows that the damage will include blown-out windows and doors.

During an afternoon news conference at the town's auction barn, reporters questioned Cornyn and U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, about whether they would begin to take steps to more closely regulate potentially dangerous chemicals, such as those used in fertilizer plants.

"Right now, (authorities) are investigating all of it," Cornyn said. "We will wait for their recommendations."

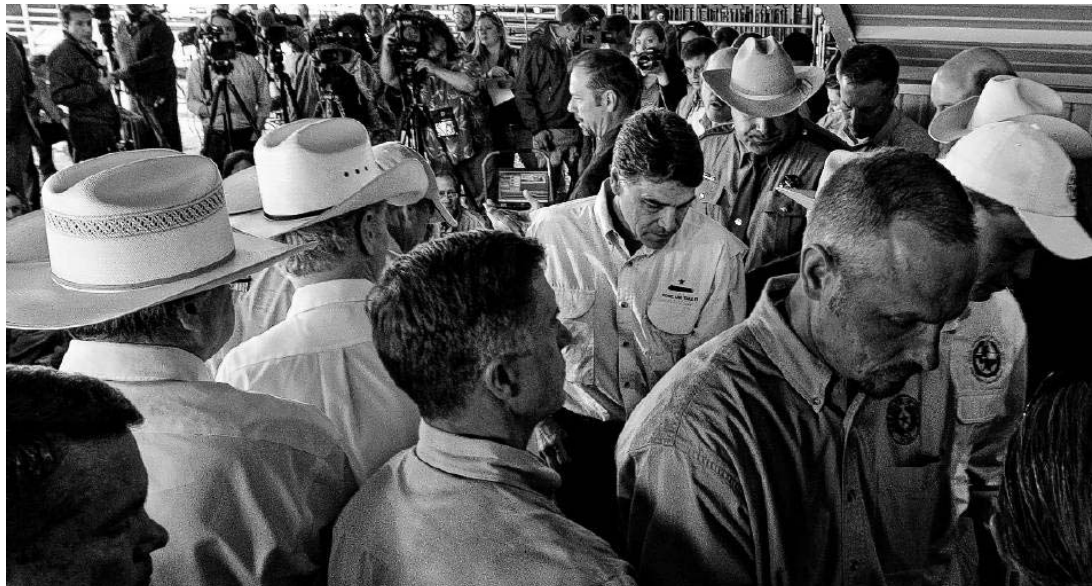
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The senators also took the opportunity to tell the nation about how residents of the state were providing aid.

Cruz said he had talked to one victim, whose home was damaged, about how she struggled to accept the outpouring of support. She helped the victims of the September 2011 Bastrop wildfire.

"She said, 'I'm used to helping others, and now everyone is here helping us,'" Cruz said.

Contact Tony Plohetski at 445-3605.



Gov. Rick Perry (center) spent Friday in West and said help would come from across the state. RODOLFO GONZALEZ / AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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Monique Hardin (left) hugs Shamala Johnson while distributing donated goods to residents of West on Friday. Authorities said the amount of items donated to help families in West has far exceeded the need and they recommend only cash donations now. RON TENNIS / FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

THE VICTIMS

Emergency crews died heroes

They rushed to help battle blaze and are survived by a town that will never forget them.

By Dave Harmon and Tim Eaton
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WEST — Morris Bridges had bounced from town to town before he found a real home in West and a real love of firefighting. Jerry Chapman had bounced from job to job and was on the verge of reaching a treasured goal of becoming an emergency medical technician.

On Wednesday, when the call came — a fire at West Fertilizer Co. — both men joined a team of first responders who fought the flames. And both died when the plant exploded, along with at least 12 others.

Though state and local officials have not yet released the names of those confirmed killed in the blast — saying only that 14 are confirmed dead and others remain unaccounted for — residents in West, Abbott and Hillsboro know the ones they lost, the names circling through countless conversations.

One after another, they talked Friday about losing members of their communal family.

Steve Vanek, the mayor pro tem of West and a volunteer firefighter for 20 years, said he has known most of the fallen firefighters their entire lives.

"We are buddies," Vanek said. "We have weddings together. We have birthday parties together. It's tough."

Susanne Nemmer, an assistant to a McLennan County commissioner, said the loss of Joey Pustejovsky, a volunteer firefighter and West's city clerk, was especially hard because he was a driving force in so many civic projects.

"I wouldn't have been surprised if he were mayor someday," she said.

Deanna Allcock, a cashier at the Family Dollar in West, talked about losing her buddy Doug Snokhaus, who died in the explosion with his brother and fellow volunteer firefighter Robert Snokhaus.

"He was very, very proud to be a volunteer firefighter, she said. "We're going to miss him very much."

Roger Wilson, a Cedar Park police chaplain who has ministered to victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and the Oklahoma City bombing, was at the fire station in West on Friday



Shelby McComas (right), 28, hands out a flier for a fundraiser Saturday for the family of her fallen friend Jerry Chapman, a volunteer firefighter who recently turned 26. RODOLFO GONZALEZ / AMERICAN STATESMAN



Carmen Bridges, 41, holds 2-year-old son Jaimeson on Friday. Bridges' husband, Morris, was among the firefighters killed in the explosion. RODOLFO GONZALEZ / AMERICAN STATESMAN

morning to meet with survivors.

"It's a ministry of presence," Wilson said. "If they cry, it's OK if they cry. If they get mad, it's OK to get mad. I just take the baby steps with them to recovery."

'He went out a hero'

At the Black-eyed Pea off Interstate 35, the servers looked stricken and sad as they worked through Friday's lunch rush without Chapman, a Hillsboro resident who had served in the nearby Abbott Volunteer Fire Department and was taking an EMT class in West.

Chapman's life ended between two milestones: He had turned 26 earlier this month, and he was a week away from taking his final EMT exam, friends said.

He had worked at an ice cream shop, a convenience store and Wal-Mart over the years, but he found a kind of second home at the restaurant where he worked on and off for six years, said Fatima Creamer, general manager.

The staff is like a family, she said, and Chapman was the guy they all knew they could count on in a crisis.

"If you were stranded, you could call him at 2 in the morning, and he'd jump in his truck and come get you," she said.

Sharon Matthews, 32, a manager at the restaurant and a close friend, said that on the day he died, Chapman had texted her to ask off his Thursday shift. A friend's vehicle had broken down, and Chapman planned to drive the friend to his home on the Texas coast, a 12-hour round trip.

For a while, Chapman worked days at the restaurant and nights at Wal-Mart, and he often slept in the restaurant or in his Ford F-150 outside so he wouldn't miss his shift as a server, said Shelby McComas, 28, another friend who used to work as a server alongside Chapman.

He would interrupt his vacations to work Sunday mornings because it was always the restaurant's busiest shift. And he wouldn't let his friends walk to their cars alone after their shifts.

"For the past two years, I have not walked out of here at night without him with me," Matthews said.

A few weeks ago, McComas finally persuaded Chapman to let her cut his shoulder-length hair after a year of trying: a grown-up haircut for his new career as an EMT, she said.

Chapman was always wearing a Batman shirt, hoodie or necklace, McComas said. Batman, she said, "is a superhero without superhero powers. That sums up Jerry pretty good. He went out a hero."

On Friday, Matthews and McComas — wearing matching Batman T-shirts — came to the

HOW TO HELP

Authorities said Friday that charitable organizations have received more donations of food, clothing and other items than are needed in West and said that excess donations will be distributed to surrounding areas. They said for those still wishing to help, cash donations to the Red Cross of Central Texas or the Salvation Army would be welcome.

restaurant to pick up a stack of fliers announcing a fundraiser for Chapman's family. They spent the afternoon taping them up on store windows all over Hillsboro. And still, they can't believe he's gone.

"I keep hoping it's not true," McComas said.

"That we're going to hear from him," Matthews added. "It still hasn't hit yet — that he's not coming back."

The fundraiser will be Saturday at the restaurant. But first, his friends are going together to get Batman tattoos.

'West welcomed him'

A fearless firefighter and dedicated family man, Bridges, 41, wasn't always as focused as he had been in recent years. He bounced around a lot for a while. He lived in Pleasant Grove, Mesquite, Sunnyvale, Sulphur Springs, Greenville and finally West.

He tried on several careers: house-building, massage therapy, nursing, electrician's helper.

Not until he got to West three years ago did he settle into a good job as a sprinkler fitter at Action Fire Pros, a commercial fire protection company in Waxahachie, said Daryl Barber, his friend of 21 years and co-worker.

For Bridges, the tight-knit community was also the perfect place to raise his 18-year-old son, Brent; his 17-year-old daughter, Brittany; and his baby boy, 2-year-old Jaimeson. This is also where he started his life with his wife, Carmen; the couple rekindled an old relationship at the pair's 20th Bruceville High reunion in 2010.

Two months later, they were married and headed to West.

Bridges loved the small-town feel of the farming community, and before long, everyone knew the gregarious, 6-foot-2-inch newcomer.

"Morris liked being recog-

nized," Barber said. "West welcomed him."

Bridges joined the volunteer fire department and found a big source of pride in being a firefighter, regularly wearing his department badge pinned to the center chest pocket of his overalls.

"He wore it off the clock," Barber recalled. "I think he had a sincere sense of belonging."

The ever-present badge was the source of a practical joke at last Thursday's quarterly staff meeting at Action Fire Pros, when 30 or 40 of his co-workers showed up with tiny badges stuck to their shirts — the kind fire departments give to kids. When the meeting ended, they all removed their stickers and slapped them on Bridges, Barber said.

"He's fun to rub, but he can take it as well as he can dish it out," said Barber, who sometimes still spoke of his late friend in the present tense. "He always had a smile on his face. He was a big-hearted guy."

Carmen Bridges described her husband as a kind of cowboy, smiling as she recalled her motorcycle-loving husband with clean-cut hair, starched Wranglers and occasionally a lip full of Copenhagen tobacco.

Carmen Bridges remembered the last time she saw her husband: They were playing with the baby outside their house — which she has not been allowed to see since the blast — when Bridges got a call about the fire at the fertilizer plant.

Bridges gave his baby one last twirl, kissed him and said, "Daddy loves you. I'll be right back."

"That's the last time we saw him," she said.

As she stood Friday in front of the West Community Center with her squirming 2-year-old on her hip, Bridges' wife squinted in the sun and explained that every time a man in a red shirt walks by or a motorcycle revs up nearby, their son says,

"Daddy, Daddy."

"He knows something's wrong but doesn't know what," she said.

She already knows what she'll tell Jaimeson about his father.

"His dad was a hero. He died a hero," she said. "He didn't think twice about running in."

Contact Dave Harmon at 445-3645. Contact Tim Eaton at 445-3631. Additional material from staff writer Tony Plohetzki.

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INSURANCE

Too early for West damage estimate

By Gary Dinges
gdinges@statesman.com

Just hours after a blast leveled homes and businesses in West, insurance adjusters were already delivering checks to hundreds of affected residents, an industry spokesman said Friday.

Mark Hanna of the Insurance Council of Texas and other industry officials said it's too early to estimate a dollar figure on the damage done by the blast at a fertilizer facility.

The "alternative living expenses" checks that insurance companies are already delivering are meant to cover costs associated with finding temporary housing and transportation, as well as food and clothing, Hanna said.

"This is a catastrophic situation where you literally had homes disappear," he said. "Many people may only have the clothes on their backs."

Hanna said most homeowner policies provide for alternative living expenses, as well as reimbursement for actual damage, for a variety of catastrophes — even some-

INSURANCE ASSISTANCE
Residents who have insurance-related questions or complaints may call the Texas Department of Insurance at 800-252-3439.

thing as unusual as Wednesday's explosion.

"Every policy is going to be different, varying from person to person and company to company," said Bill Melander, a spokesman for Allstate's National Catastrophe Team.

Even with checks being issued almost immediately in some cases, Hanna and other industry officials said it's too soon to estimate total damage.

"It may be a small community," Hanna said, "but the insurance companies are treating this as a major catastrophe."

All of the state's major insurance companies have called in disaster response crews from across the nation to help process claims from residents, Hanna said.

While state and federal



A dog sits Thursday on the front porch of a home in West, where the siding has been melted away by a fire from the house next door. The fire followed the explosion of a fertilizer plant Wednesday night. RODOLFO GONZALEZ / AMERICAN-STATESMAN

agencies are still assessing damage, the explosion is believed to have killed more than a dozen people, injured nearly 200 more and damaged or destroyed as many as 100 homes in West, a small town 120 miles north of Austin with fewer than 3,000 residents.

With recovery efforts still under way, officials with several insurance companies said few claims have been received so far.

"It's too early to know the extent of the damages, with the impacted area being closed by authorities and search/rescue efforts taking precedence at this time," State Farm spokeswoman Patti Kelly said. "State Farm claims associates are in the area, where accessible, assessing the impact and customer needs. We will continue to wait for access and are available for customers who need us."

Friday, State Farm had set up a temporary claims center at a local car dealership, Kelly said.

Melander said Allstate has sent in specialized adjusters who are "trained to handle a wide variety of situations, such as explosions, tornadoes and things like that."

"This is definitely a unique situation, but it's the type of situation we train for," he said. "The cause of this event is very different, very unexpected, but you have to deal with it just like you'd deal with any other catastrophic event."

Nationwide Insurance has several customers in the West area but hadn't received any claims as of Friday afternoon, spokeswoman Elizabeth Spelzer said.

"Safety is our top concern right now, and we've been proactively reaching out to our members to make sure they are OK," she said. "Thankfully, we've been able to make contact with most — if not all — of them."

Contact Gary Dinges at 912-5987. Twitter: @gdinges



This aerial photograph shows the remains of the West Fertilizer Co. plant that was destroyed by an explosion Wednesday night. A damaged emergency response vehicle is visible in the bottom left. The plant was built in 1960. The town of West 'grew up and around that fertilizer plant,' said Gary Payne of Brazos Feed and Supply. TONY GUTIERREZ / ASSOCIATED PRESS

WEST FERTILIZER CO.

Fertilizer plant, owner longtime fixtures in West

By Jeremy Schwartz
jschwartz@statesman.com

For half a century, West Fertilizer Co. has been a fixture in the town of West, a place where generations of area farmers have gotten custom mixes of nitrate, potash and phosphorus to feed their fields and keep their hay pastures green.

Similar to scores of other small- to medium-sized fertilizer blenders and distributors across the state, it has played a vital role in the farming life of a wide swath of McLennan County.

Before the plant exploded Wednesday evening shortly after closing time, 13 employees worked there. They produced about 5,000 tons of fertilizer a year for local farmers, often custom blended for specific soil types and times of year, according to state records.

"There's no question that business has done a lot for that town," said Gary Payne, owner of Brazos Feed and Supply in nearby Waco, who first shopped at the plant in the 1980s when he worked as a hay baler. "In agriculture, you got to have fertilizer, and that was the backbone of that area. In small rural places like that, that's what it's like."

Similarly prominent is the company's owner, West patri-

'The man has honesty and integrity.'

Len Martin, West resident, talking about West Fertilizer Co. owner Donald Adair, 83

arch Donald Adair, 83, whose family also owns an adjacent grain and farming business. Adair, who bought the fertilizer plant less than a decade ago, was born and raised in West, where several of his children still live.

"The man is devastated by what's happened," said West resident Len Martin, who attends the West Church of Christ, where Adair has long served as an elder. "This is just a very hard thing. There are no absolute answers, no easy words to make it go away."

Adair was attending Bible study when fire broke out at his plant Wednesday evening, according to the Church of Christ's official organ, the Christian Chronicle.

Martin said Adair is a deeply faithful man who had earned a strong reputation in town.

"I have not heard of anyone in the community who didn't have respect for the man," Martin said. "The man has honesty and integrity."

Adair could not be reached for comment, but by Friday afternoon he had hired a

Dallas public relations representative and released a statement.

"As a lifelong resident, my heart is broken with grief for the tragic losses to so many families in our community," Adair wrote. "My family and I can't express enough our deep appreciation for the loving service and selfless sacrifice from within and around our community responding to the urgent needs of those affected. I am proud to be associated with West Church of Christ, which has opened its doors to the State of Texas to provide grief counseling services. My family and I will continue to assist in relief efforts through our church family."

West Fertilizer began as Texas Grain and was founded in 1958 by the Plasek family, according to court documents in a civil case brought by Adair against the Monsanto Co. in 2007. In 1960, the fledgling company "built a small fertilizer blend plant for farmers in the area and started selling fertilizer and grain storage services for other farmers in Texas," according to the records.

"The town grew up and around that fertilizer plant," Payne said. "It's a staple. That's how agriculture works."

Contact Jeremy Schwartz at 912-2942.

FERTILIZER INDUSTRY

Trade group fought EPA's rules for blending facilities

By Jeremy Schwartz
jschwartz@statesman.com

A national trade group that represents fertilizer suppliers recently sought to convince federal lawmakers that retailers that blend fertilizer — such as West Fertilizer Co. — should be excluded from rules requiring them to cooperate in the development of emergency plans and to publicly reveal their chemical inventories.

The Agricultural Retailers Association said in its 2012 congressional lobbying report that it seeks to "work with the EPA to clarify their new Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act interpretation of fertilizer retailer to exclude facilities that blend fertilizer."

According to association representatives, the blending of dry fertilizer, such as ammonium nitrate, is extremely safe and lumping blenders in with manufacturers represents a regulatory burden for small businesses. It's not clear what caused Wednesday's explosion at the West plant, which occurred after business hours.

During a Senate Environment & Public Works Committee meeting last year, Sen. James Inhofe, R-OK, declared that "if EPA continues down this road they will be imposing additional costs on hundreds of small businesses and farmers in rural America."

However, it's not just the West Fertilizer explosion that shows the potential dangers

inside blending facilities. In 2009, a fire at the El Dorado Chemical Co. in Bryan, which also stores and blends fertilizer, caused the first mandatory evacuation in the city's history and injured dozens.

According to the Sunlight Foundation, which first reported the lobbying effort, the Agricultural Retailers Association has spent \$2.9 million since 1998 to lobby Congress on issues affecting its members. An EPA spokesperson told the Statesman on Friday that the agency has not amended its rules and continues to require enhanced reporting from fertilizer blenders.

West Fertilizer, which the association says is not a member of the group, has been fined for lax compliance with similar planning requirements.

The Environmental Protection Agency fined the plant \$2,300 in 2006 after inspectors found the company had failed to update its risk management plan in a timely manner.

And the company's most recent risk management plan, filed in 2011, drastically underestimated a "worst case" incident at the plant, stating that it would be a 10-minute leak of anhydrous ammonia, not the catastrophic explosion that occurred Wednesday night, for which the death toll — reported to be at least 14 as of Friday evening — is still not certain.

Contact Jeremy Schwartz at 912-2942.

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Volunteers unload donated goods at the WestFest grounds Friday for residents in need. PHOTOS BY RON T. ENNIS / FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

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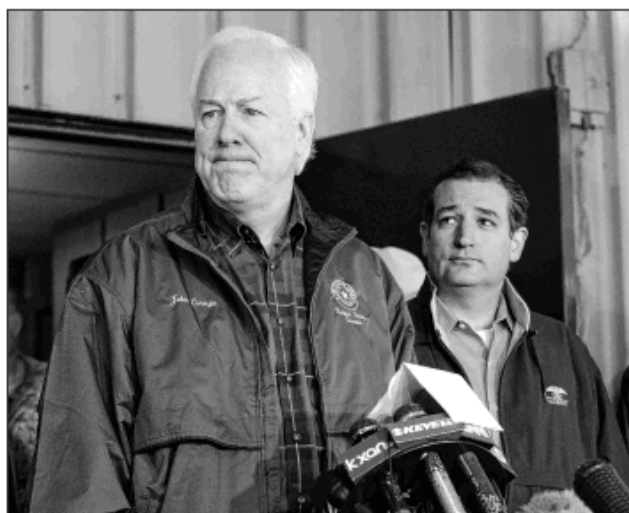
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Texas Rep. Charles "Doc" Anderson, a Republican whose district includes

most of McLennan County, told the American-Statesman that the remains of some victims were taken to a state mobile morgue and that DNA testing is necessary to identify them. He did not know where such testing would be done.

Members of a county disaster emergency preparedness team are working to help notify relatives of the victims, he said.

Officials have said that the explosion destroyed 50 homes and an apartment building and damaged a middle school and a nursing home in the town of fewer than 3,000, which is about 120 miles north of Austin.

Perry described the scene as "absolute devastation."

"It's going to be a long recovery for this community," he added.

Several large insurers,

including Texas Farm Bureau and Allstate, set up mobile claim processing centers throughout the town.

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Contact Tony Plohotski at 445-3605.



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