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Harris County jury awards hefty amount for men injured in pipeline explosion



By [Gheni Platenburg](#)

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A Harris County jury returned a hefty verdict on Tuesday for the families of three men burned in a 2008 Vanderbilt pipeline explosion.

The jury deliberated for around two days before awarding Luis Moreno, Meliton Lerma and Genaro Castillo \$19.9 million for injuries they sustained from the incident.

"All of these damages were for actual damages. None were for punitive damages," said Houston-based attorney John C. Ramsey, one of the attorneys who represented the Moreno family.

Calls to the defense attorneys in the case were not immediately returned.

In June 2008, the three victims were performing demolition work at a Hilcorp Energy-operated gas plant located on the West Ranch, on Farm-to-Market Road 616 West - about a mile south of Vanderbilt.

Hilcorp contracted with Austin-based A&R Demolition to perform demolition work on a decommissioned portion of the plant.

In turn, A&R hired RCS Demolition of Midland to remove flange valves from the gas plant.

The three victims were among the hired RCS employees.

During their second week of work, the RCS crew members came across a pocket of residual hydrocarbons while using their cutting torch, which caused an explosion and fire.

During discovery, Hilcorp admitted they did not properly vent, purge and clean all the lines prior to the commencement of the demolition project.

But they never warned its contractor or subcontractors of the hidden danger, said a news release.

During the trial, A&R's attorneys claimed Hilcorp and A&R told its contractors and subcontractors that this was to be a no fire project, and cutting torches were prohibited.

Despite this alleged warning, A&R's own crew used cutting torches during the entire project.

"They were systematically abusing their own rules if that was in fact the policy," said Ramsey.

The jury found that both A&R and Hilcorp were negligent in causing the fire.

They also apportioned some responsibility to RCS and a small percentage to the plaintiff.

Moreno suffered second and third-degree burns to 57 percent of his body, while Castillo had burns over 10 percent of his body.

Lerma, who received burns over 50 percent of his body, died from his injuries.

"We were very pleased with the jury verdict," said Ramsey.

The verdict was split three ways, with Moreno receiving approximately \$13 million to compensate for his \$536,000 in past medical bills and an expected \$1.2 million in future medical bills, as well as compensation for injuries sustained.

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