

October 01, 2024 11:24 AM |

## Six Impact Plastics employees reported dead following Helene floods



CATHERINE KAVANAUGH [X](#) [in](#) [✉](#)  
Senior Reporter



Tennessee Emergency Management

An aerial view of some areas affected by the flooded Nolichucky River in Tennessee.

Local reports quoting employees of Erwin, Tenn.-based Impact Plastics Inc. say up to six employees died when flash floods from Hurricane Helene swept through Unicoi

County on Sept. 27.

[Employee Robert Jarvis told News 5 WCYB](#) that six workers were swept away by the flooded Nolichucky River, which runs near the business park housing injection molder Impact Plastics.

Another worker, Jacob Ingram, told Knox News that some employees survived by clinging to yellow plastic pipe made by PolyPipe USA, another manufacturer at the site. [Ingram posted several videos on Facebook](#) showing the flooding and employees hanging onto a truck loaded with pipe.

The workers and the company are telling conflicting stories about the minutes preceding the devastation.

At least one survivor and families of the missing workers say they were not allowed to evacuate, but the company denies that claim.

The Riverview Industrial Park, where the injection molding business is located, was closed on Sept. 30. The business park is by the Nolichucky River, which reportedly swelled with a rush of water comparable to nearly twice what cascades over Niagara Falls.

Jarvis took issue with a company statement that management had been monitoring the weather situation before the flood. He said he got a text that the parking lot was flooding and went out to check his car.

"I moved my car to higher ground, which it was still in water. There wasn't no dry ground in the parking lot," Jarvis told WCYB. "I got out. I said can we leave, and the woman said no."

The woman then consulted with a manager, he said.

"About 10 minutes later she came back and said y'all can leave. It was too late," Jarvis said. "We had one way in, one way out. When they told us we could leave, the one way out was blocked off. So, we're stuck in traffic on that road waiting to see what we'd do."

Some employees with four-wheel drive vehicles managed to get around the others.

"But if you didn't have four-wheel drive or if you were stuck in that line I was stuck in, it was too late because, I mean, like I said, my car got washed down the river, down the road actually."

"They should've evacuated when we got the flash flood warnings, and when they saw the parking lot," [Ingram told Knox News](#). "When we moved our cars we should've evacuated then. ... We asked them if we should evacuate, and they told us not yet, it wasn't bad enough.

"And by the time it was bad enough, it was too late unless you had a four-wheel-drive," he said.

Ingram told Knox that he and 10 other employees were fighting their way through waist-deep water in the parking lot when a truck driver from PolyPipe called them over and helped them get onto the back of his open-bed truck, which was packed full of large yellow flexible gas pipe.

They were there for hours waiting for rescue. The truck was hit by debris several times, knocking some people into the water, he said. Eventually the trailer flipped, but he and others managed to hang onto the pipe.

### **Cutting through fence**

Other employees who were able to keep driving started up an old train route road and got stuck along the way. Then they heard about a place where employees of a nearby business had cut a hole in the fence.

"I lost my car and I'm sort of floating down the river," Jarvis said in the WCYB interview. "Well, we didn't know what to do. We were in panic mode. The water was coming up. And then we did what we had to survive. A guy in a four by four came and picked a bunch of us up and saved our lives or we'd have been dead, too."

Impact Plastics officials issued a news release expressing sympathy for the employees and one contractor.

"We are devastated by the tragic loss of great employees," founder Gerald O'Connor said. "Those who are missing or deceased, and their families are in our thoughts and prayers."

According to the release, company officials had been monitoring the weather and dismissed employees after water covered the parking lot and service road and the plant lost power.

"At no time were employees told that they would be fired if they left the facility," the release stated. "For employees who were non-English speaking, bilingual employees were among the group of managers who delivered the message."

Most employees left immediately but "some remained on or near the premises for unknown reasons," the release says.

Senior managers were the last to leave the building after overseeing employee departures and preserving company records, the release continues.

"As flooding escalated, some employees left the industrial park using a truck owned by a neighboring company and driven by a driver employed by that company. Others departed by the CSX railroad track behind the facility due to the high waters at the front door and coming into the building," the release stated, duplicating what Ingram told Knox.

"Due to the quickly rising water the truck tipped over and five employees and a contractor aboard the truck went missing. Five others who were also on the truck when it tipped over made it to safety and were later evacuated."

Senior managers sought help for others, the release continues, and a National Guard helicopter was dispatched and able to airlift five employees to safety.

A search is continuing. The families of missing employees Lydia Verdugo, Monica Hernandez, Rosa Andrade and Bertha Mendoza held their photos at a news conference.

Through an interpreter, a relative of Verdugo told local radio station Livewire 103.9: "They wouldn't let them leave. They wouldn't say evacuate. ... If they would've told them to leave earlier, maybe they'd be here today, and we wouldn't be looking for them."

Hernandez and Andrade reportedly were among the people who climbed onto the back of the truck.

"They were holding onto pipes calling 911 for help and that help didn't come," one relative said through an interpreter.

Jarvis said Impact Plastics should have closed for the day.

"We shouldn't have worked. We shouldn't have been there. None of us should have been there," he said.

He is experiencing survivor's guilt, Jarvis added.

"They were good. Every one of them were good people. I worked with them every day and we were like family," he said. "We caught up, we joked there and it broke my heart to see that they died and that they didn't make it all because of greed, I think."

Impact Plastics officials plan to reopen the 37-year-old company, which produces components for more than two dozen original equipment manufacturers, but no timeline was given.

For now, a recovery center is being organized to aid Impact Plastic employees and provide information about their benefits and other local job opportunities.

PolyPipe USA is a manufacturer of polyethylene pipe for natural gas and utility applications. All PolyPipe employees have been accounted for and the business is closed while damage is assessed.