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Worker dies in construction accident

DEEP CREEK -- One man was killed and two fellow workers were injured Friday after a storm drainage pipe at a construction site filled with water.

Investigators are trying to figure out what caused the death of Carmen Villafuerte, 33, of Arcadia, at a Deep Creek construction site after a torrent of water flooded the underground concrete drainage chamber he was working in Friday morning.

The men were working in a 5-foot-by-5-foot concrete storm drainage box when a reinforced air bladder -- designed to keep water out of the pipe -- exploded, sending a flood of lake water pouring in, according to Dee Hawkins, the spokeswoman for Charlotte County Fire & EMS.

The men were 10 feet below ground level at the Heritage Lake Park condominium development when the accident happened, Hawkins said.

When the bladder exploded, Hawkins explained, the water forced Villafuerte into one of the large 60-foot pipes.

"It's like getting hit with a truck with that amount of pressure coming out," Hawkins said.

Villafuerte's coworkers, Panfrio Velasco, 27, and Rigaberto Delacruz, 24, managed to crawl out of the hole, but Villafuerte remained below.

Coworkers at the site scrambled frantically to find Villafuerte. Charlotte County Fire & EMS officials arrived at the scene just after 11 a.m. The dispatch message said three men were trapped in a storm drain following an explosion inside a pipe.

The agency's Special Operations Unit led the rescue effort. With a combination of extricating tools and manpower, the unit worked to find Villafuerte. But an hour later, the rescue effort ended when they pulled out Villafuerte's battered body. He had traveled about 100 feet in the pipes before landing underneath another worker's truck.

At the sight of the dead worker, dozens of workers, construction administrators and authorities raced over to the scene as he was pulled out. One of the workers, who apparently was friends with Villafuerte, was covered in mud and visibly distraught at the scene. He stared at the limp,

battered body of his friend and was gently escorted away soon after.

Villafuerte was recovered and carried out of the hole. But he had no pulse and was pronounced dead at the scene, according to Vern Riggall, the deputy chief for the Charlotte County Fire & EMS special operations.

Riggall said the rescue was challenging because of the deep, muddy conditions.

"On a scale of one to 10, this was a 20," Riggall said.

The [Charlotte County Sheriff's](#) Major Crimes Unit and the federal Occupational Safety & Health Administration are investigating Villafuerte's death.

OSHA officials opened an investigation to find out what happened. According to Les Grove, the area director of the Tampa area OSHA office, the agency investigates any construction site fatality.

Though Grove said he could not talk specifically about the case at the Deep Creek site, he said, in general, the agency tries to check out whether there were any violations of OSHA regulations.

The investigation could be as short as several weeks or take up to a couple of months to complete. OSHA has six months to complete an investigation.

Delacruz was flown by helicopter to Lee Memorial Hospital in Fort Myers. He was treated and later released. Velasco was taken by ambulance to Peace River Medical Center Hospital where he was treated and also released Friday.

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