

Some ropes removed from Texas A&M bonfire hours before collapse

by Victoria Loe Hicks
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DALLAS — Four of the eight ropes that stabilized the center pole of the Aggie bonfire were removed hours before the 60-foot log stack collapsed last November, killing 12 people, according to an engineering report released Monday.

The report by Rogers Engineering Services of College Station, Texas, does not suggest that cutting the ropes caused the bonfire to fall. But an engineering professor at Southern Methodist University said severing the ropes would have made the pole more vulnerable to snapping under the many stresses applied to it.

"That might be significant. That probably is getting at the source" of the Nov. 18 tragedy, said Dr. Hal Watson, a specialist in accident reconstruction.

Leo E. Linbeck Jr., the Houston construction executive who is overseeing the investigation into the collapse, said he is aware of the report but has not read it. He said it has been forwarded to one of the consulting firms hired to analyze data on the accident.

"I'm sure it will be quite interesting to the forensic engineers," he said, adding, however, that it is too early to know which pieces of information ultimately will hold the key to the mystery.

Rogers Engineering was called in by A&M officials hours after the collapse to help dismantle the log pile and free victims and survivors. The firm's president, Alton G. Rogers, submitted a report on Dec. 10 describing that grisly process and noting several possible structural anomalies

based on his observations, conversations with others and analysis of photos taken before and after the accident.

"RES (Rogers Engineering) was informed that eight guy ropes originally stabilized the center pole," Rogers wrote. "The four lower guy ropes were cut free from the center pole approximately two to three hours prior to the collapse."

Rogers did not reveal who told him the ropes had been removed or why, and he wrote that he had not independently verified the information.

Monday, Rogers Engineering referred questions to the university, which has designated Linbeck to answer all queries about the accident and investigation.

The center pole snapped in three places, although it is not yet clear whether the breaks occurred before or during the collapse. By Rogers' measurements, the breaks occurred a few inches below ground level and at roughly the tops of the first and fourth (the highest) tiers.

Watson, the SMU engineering professor, said one thing is certain: the

pole was not able to withstand the forces acting on it. And having guy ropes attached near the bottom or in the middle — as well as at the top — would have made it better able to do so.

At any given time, the center pole was likely to have a number of different loads applied to it. Some students worked on swings suspended from it. And logs were lifted onto the top tiers pulley-style by trucks pulling on "tag

Rogers estimated to weigh 870,000 lbs., appeared to lean slightly in the direction that the stack eventually fell. Photos taken over several days suggest that the lean became more pronounced in the final days, he wrote.

— The driller who sank the 14-foot hole for the center pole hit a previous year's pole, causing the augur to "kick to the side four to five inches out of plumb." To straighten it, the driller was instructed to make the hole several inches wider, with the understanding that the space around the pole would be filled in once the pole was in place.

Watson said he doubted that the width of the hole was a factor in the collapse. If the soil packed around the center pole had given way, he said, he would not have expected the pole to snap as it did.

But he said any imbalance in the stacked logs could be significant, because it would have created stress on the center pole — although it's not clear how much.

"If the first tier was leaning, one side would have been pushing against the center pole more," he said.

In the photos, Rogers wrote, the first stack appeared to be perpendicular to the ground, which slopes to the southeast. The slope is such that the

ground under the northwestern edge of the stack would have been about nine inches higher than at the southeastern edge, he calculated. When the stack collapsed, the engineer wrote, it "fell to the east southeast."

It appeared to have fallen "in a manner similar to a stack of playing cards," Rogers wrote. Among the logs on the first tier, he observed, those on the west side appeared to have rotated around their bases "at an angle of approximately 20 degrees from vertical."

Rogers said that, as far as he could see, "the pole did not fail in the ground prior to the collapse. It did not appear that the pole had rotated."

That initially surprised him, he wrote, although he realized upon reflection that "if the bonfire initially failed between the first and second stacks, a mass shifting of the first stack could possibly shear the center pole at the ground."

Linbeck said such observations are "tantalizing." But he said the investigative panel is "trying hard not to engage in speculation."

"There is an enormous amount of information to digest," he said. "I understand the impatience. I'm impatient, too. But we're trying to get the whole story written, and then analyze it."

A&M President Ray Bowen, who appointed Linbeck, has charged the commission to report its findings by the end of March. However, some of the consultants hired by the panel already have said their work will take longer than that.

A&M has budgeted \$250,000 for the probe, although some of those involved have suggested that the final tab will be at least twice that amount.



KRT PHOTO - LINDA EPSTEIN

Overall view of the collapsed bonfire at Texas A&M in College Station. Shortly before 3 a.m. November 18, 1999, the bonfire log pile shifted as dozens of students worked all-night shifts atop stacks of wood on the A&M polo fields. The top logs crashed to the ground, killing 12 students and injuring 28 others.

"If there is an imbalance of load from the side, that puts the pole in bending stress. Wires at the bottom reduce that bending," he said. Thus, to remove the lower ropes would have "put that center pole into a lot more bending stress," he said.

lines" that ran through fasteners near the top of the pole.

The removal of the guy ropes was only one item Rogers catalogued. Among the others were that:

— Although the center pole was plumb, the first tier of logs, which

Dartmouth report recommends continuation of Greek organizations

TMS Campus
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DARTMOUTH, N.H. (TMS) — A new report from Dartmouth College officials recommends that the campus's single-sex fraternities and sororities be allowed to continue, despite a plan devised by the institution's board of trustees to make student life "substantially coeducational."

Students have been waiting for the recently released report since last February, when announcements about gender integration sparked a series of protests on the campus, which is more closely linked to Greek organizations than any other Ivy League school.

Roughly half of the college's sophomores, juniors and seniors belong to single-sex fraternities or sororities, and surveys have indicated that a strong majority of undergraduates support the groups' continuation.

Despite support for the students, the report — submitted by

administrators, faculty and students on the committee — does state that an overhaul of Dartmouth's Greek life is "absolutely necessary."

The report notes that the Greek organizations have less racial diversity than the campus as a whole and that many houses are in desperate need of repair, including some that have "fetid ... basements in which the stench of bodily fluids was pervasive." The report also states that insensitive behavior such as the "ghetto party" thrown by one fraternity in 1998 are too common. It also criticizes the organizations' focus on drinking games, which encourage excessive alcohol consumption.

"If it is to survive, the system must change significantly," the report states.

The committee recommended that Dartmouth allow only seniors and four juniors to live in each fraternity house. It also suggested that the college delay rush until the winter quarter, al-

lowing students to settle in to campus life without the pressure

"If it is to survive, the system must change significantly."

-Dartmouth College report

of having to join a Greek organization.

The report also states that all tap systems used to dispense beer from kegs should be removed. Committee members also recommended that the board of trustees review the issue in five years to determine whether Greek groups have made enough progress to deserve to be allowed to continue.

Trustees are reviewing the committee's recommendations and are expected to take action in the spring.

Supreme Court hears rape case involving Virginia Tech student

TMS Campus
January 11, 2000

SPRINGFIELD, Va. (TMS) — In a case that could change the legal boundaries between state and federal government, the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments Tuesday on whether a former Virginia Tech student should be allowed to sue in federal court two men who allegedly raped her.

The justices will decide whether Congress acted outside its authority when it approved the Violence Against Women Act in 1994, the federal law under which Christy Brzonkala is suing for damages.

Brzonkala's lawyers claim the law is needed because state justice systems fail to adequately protect women from rape, sexual assault and domestic violence. The law's supporters in-

clude the Clinton administration and most state attorneys general, who contend that victimization costs the U.S. economy billions of dollars each year. They contend that victims should be allowed to sue their attackers for monetary damages.

But opponents counter that the federal government should not have unlimited power to regulate state matters such as crime. According to court records filed by attorneys representing the two former Virginia Tech athletes accused of raping Brzonkala, the law "displaces state prerogative in areas of traditional state authority." Allowing Congress to regulate matters of non-economic conduct would "authorize Congress to regulate virtually anything," the also claimed.

The attorneys are backed by the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which

threw out Brzonkala's lawsuit against the athletes, saying that Congress' power to regulate interstate commerce and assure citizens equal protection did not also authorize it to enact a portion of the act that allowed victims to sue their attackers.

The Supreme Court, which has in recent years increasingly handed more power to the states, is expected to render a decision in July.

Brzonkala became the first person to sue under the federal law in 1995 when she filed suit against Antonio Morrison and James Crawford. She alleged the two then-football players raped her in her dormitory room.

Brzonkala did not report the alleged attack for several months, and the men were never charged with a crime.



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