130 out of work after seafood plant fire in Oregon

Christine Schofelt
7 June 2013

A fire broke out at about 10:45 a.m. on Tuesday morning at the Warrenton, Oregon Pacific Seafood processing plant, with flames and smoke shooting some 150 feet into the air. The smell of burning creosote from the pier on which the plant was partially located and plastic from fish totes wafted for miles. No fatalities were reported in the two-alarm fire that totally engulfed and destroyed the plant.

Explosions heard were speculated to be from the ignition of fuel tanks of forklifts in the building. As of this writing, the cause of the fire had not been determined. Firefighters returned to the scene at least twice on Wednesday to battle flare-ups.

Witnesses report that the fire spread through the plant within minutes. The south wall of the building collapsed, the nearby Hampton Lumber Mill was evacuated, and their fire suppression system was directed to aid in battling the blaze. In all, six firefighting agencies, including the US Coast Guard, were enlisted to fight the fire. Firefighters battled the blaze for 12 hours.

Firefighting efforts were hampered by the presence of large quantities of anhydrous ammonia, used as part of the refrigeration system in the processing of the fish. In 2010, the company's Mukilteo distribution plant on the Puget Sound in Washington was fined $35,000 by the EPA, after the release of 210 pounds of ammonia from that plant.

The chemical is a common component in food processing, can cause toxic clouds of gas if it comes into contact with water, and is corrosive to the touch.

The Coast Guard shut down traffic in the Skipanon waterway, which feeds into the heavily-traveled Columbia River near the port city of Astoria, Oregon, as tanks of ammonia were removed from the waterfront scene. The shutdown stranded fishing boats trying to reach their home docks on the waterway.

Pacific Seafood is one of the largest seafood processing and distributing organizations in North America and a major employer in the northwest Oregon city of Warrenton, which has a population of 5,050.

Warrenton Mayor Mark Kujala told Oregon Public Broadcasting that it was "hard to overestimate" the impact of the fire. "It's just devastating," he said. "We're a fishing community. We have a fleet that primarily delivers to Pacific Seafood. It's not just the hundred-thirty, two-hundred employees, it's the fishermen, it's the businesses that are around the marina and around the city that are going to be impacted by this."

Fishermen, crabbers and shrimpers in the area relied on selling their catches to the plant, which could process 120,000 pounds of fish a day. During shrimp season, Pacific's peeling machines could produce 50,000 pounds of raw product daily, and during Dungeness season, Pacific Coast had the capacity to cook 90,000 pounds of crab a day.

With the loss of the plant, and despite Pacific Seafood CEO Frank Dulcich pledging to place the workers in other plants owned by the company or with "friends," there are fears of an economic ripple effect in the area, where the economy relies heavily on the fishing, logging and tourist industries. The fire came just as the summer season was upon the region, bringing hundreds of additional temporary jobs, including 100 in the destroyed facility.

Smaller processors in the area will not be able to make up for the loss of the capacity handled by Pacific Seafood, and businesses that serve the workers and fishermen are looking at the possibility of a drop in income.

© World Socialist Web Site

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site