

# Fire officials were aware of hazards prior to toxic Parkersburg, West Virginia warehouse blaze

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Local fire officials were concerned about the high risk of fire at a Parkersburg, West Virginia plastics storage warehouse for almost a decade before the eruption of a devastating fire at the facility last month. It has further emerged that the owners of the company, Intercontinental Export-Import Inc, apparently ignored state and federal requirements to supply details on what was being stored at the warehouse.

The fire that began around midnight on October 21 in the 420,000-square foot warehouse, the site a factory that closed in 2005, burned for more than five days before the it was brought under control. Toxic smoke closed schools, businesses and forced residents to seal their homes and run neither air-conditioners nor heaters.

Many people left their homes and stayed with friends or relatives to avoid the smoke.

West Virginia Governor Jim Justice declared a state of emergency as the fire, fueled by tons of stored recycled plastic, produced a towering, toxic plume of black smoke and firefighters dumped millions of gallons of water from hydrants and a local river to subdue the blaze.

“We don’t really know what’s going up into the air for sure,” Justice said early on.

The *Parkersburg News and Sentinel* reported Thursday that despite all the many questions raised about the fire and details of what was stored in the warehouse, IEI had sent officials an e-mail outlining only the sketchiest of plans. These included meeting with “local experts,” and organizing clean-up by landfill companies and performing sampling and waste classification.

There was apparently no expression of concern in the

e-mail for affected residents, pledges of support for the city or an offer to alert the town to potential health hazards.

On the IEI website, which described the company as involved in the “purchasing and selling post-industrial recycled plastics on the open market both domestically and abroad”, there was no mention of the fire.

Parkersburg is a city of about 31,000 in Wood County in the west central portion of the state next to the Ohio state line at the confluence of the Ohio and Little Kanawha rivers.

Two Wood County volunteer fire chiefs complained almost a decade ago in 2008 to the state fire marshal about fire safety problems at the facility.

“This warehouse has many of the same concerns as listed above. The Lubeck VFD (Volunteer Fire Department) was called to the site for a fire recently and could not even access the fire due to boxes stacked along the exterior of the warehouse, closing the alley,” the firefighters complained.

It was also reported that a sprinkler system in the facility was in “disrepair” and not working. The report also urged an inspection of the facility to assure the future “safety and welfare of our firefighters.”

“Our primary concern is that there will be a fire at one of these two warehouses and there will not be enough water to fight a defensive fire...Boxes stacked too high and (an) inefficient sprinkler could kill firefighters working (inside),” the report continued.

The state Department of Environmental Protection inspected the warehouse in 2011 and 2012 finding similar kinds of problems, including no groundwater protection plan involving materials stored at the warehouse. The warehouse owner, IEI, was fined

\$61,000.

State health officials evade responsibility by hiding behind the lack of detailed information on what was stored at the facility, although it is commonly understood that the burning of any kind of plastics produces toxic substances, which endanger human health and water supplies.

Despite the evident dangers confronting firefighters, West Virginia State Commissioner with the Bureau for Public Health Dr. Rahul Gupta offered only evasive comments.

“It’s important to know the facts and we don’t have all the facts right now,” Gupta told the media.

A similar fire in Blackburn, England erupted this past August. In that fire, involving a plastics recycling company that had 100 tons of stored plastic, the blaze was fortunately extinguished in a matter of hours avoiding a potentially “catastrophic” situation, local officials said.

The V10 Polymers fire burned 100 tons of plastic but was prevented from spreading to a storage area facility described as the size of a soccer field (roughly the size of an American football field) where thousands of tons of more plastic were stored.

About 20 homes were evacuated and near-by Blackburn residents, like those in Parkersburg, were told to keep their homes sealed shut to avoid the toxic smoke and fumes.

“There is a massive issue with plastic fires with the environment,” John Riley with the Blackburn Community Fire Station told Sky News. “The smoke coming off it is highly toxic and corrosive as well.”

*Sky New* reported Riley saying that the water dumped on burning plastic to extinguish the flames also has to be contained, as run-off can contaminate rivers and sewage systems with acid and chemicals contained in plastic waste.

The *Parkersburg News and Sentinel* reported that 31 fire departments from West Virginia used millions of gallons of water to try and extinguish the warehouse IEI blaze.

On the day the fire started, “we used six million gallons of the city’s water and three million gallons out of the river, “ Lübeck Volunteer Fire Chief Mark Stewart told the newspaper.

Both Blackburn and Parkersburg, once important industrial centers, now face economic distress.

Prior to the American Civil War Parkersburg was a railroad hub. After the war and the spanning of the Ohio River with the Parkersburg Bridge in 1868-1870 the town could lay claim to the longest railroad bridge in the world.

Parkersburg was an oil-refining center in the late 1800s and after WWII was a leading industrial center in the Ohio Valley. In 1960 the city had a population of 44,000, but by the time of the 2010 census the population had dropped by about a third to 31,492.

Blackburn had been a mill town since the 13th century and grew dramatically with textile manufacturing but has since then faced industrial decline.

Low-tech warehouse businesses seeking empty plants, desperate workers, low wages, craven public officials and little regulation thus are attracted to former industrial centers like Parkersburg and Blackburn.

Indeed, West Virginian officials said IEI may operate as many as five warehouses in and around Parkersburg.



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