

Fire ravages chemical plant in Passaic, New Jersey

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An 11-alarm fire that could have become an environmental disaster broke out at a warehouse and chemical plant in Passaic, New Jersey, on Friday night. The smoke from the fire was so heavy that it was detected on weather radar, and residents of New York City, which is roughly 10 miles away, were able to see and smell it. The effort to contain the fire required almost 24 hours and the mobilization of more than 200 firefighters from the region.

Passaic, which is in northeastern New Jersey, has a population of 70,537. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was home to industries that produced insulated wires, textiles and furniture. Today, Passaic is one of the poorest cities in the state, and parts of it are considered deprived areas. Its population is predominantly working class, and 39 percent of residents are foreign born.

The fire started at 8:16 p.m. at Majestic Industries, a manufacturer of furniture for casinos, according to Passaic Fire Chief Patrick Trentacost. Justin Johnson, a security guard, was checking the building's water pressure when he noticed smoke and called the fire department. Apart from Johnson, the more than 200,000-square-foot building was empty.

The fire quickly spread to a section of the building that houses Qualco, a manufacturer of products for swimming pools. State data indicate that on an average day, the Qualco facility stores as much as 3 million pounds of potentially hazardous substances, including more than 100,000 pounds of chlorine pellets. Chlorine can form explosive compounds if it mixes with chemicals such as ammonia. When chlorine gas is exposed to the body's moist tissues, it forms an acid that can damage the eyes, throat and lungs.

Close to this store of dangerous chemicals is Alfred Speer Village, a public housing development home to

thousands of residents. The fire posed an imminent danger to their health, to the rest of the densely populated city and the wider area.

The Passaic Fire Department has recently had its worst COVID-19 outbreak since the pandemic began, which complicated its response to the fire. Almost half of the 106 firefighters in the department are off work due to COVID. Trentacost himself recently contracted the virus and spent Christmas in quarantine. "It's unprecedented," he told NorthJersey.com. "I never thought that in my time I would see something like this."

The wind and below-freezing temperatures created difficulties for the firefighters. Ice caused them to slip and fall, and several fire hydrants had frozen. "Everything is turning to ice," Trentacost told CBS2. "We're losing hydrants. Right behind me, they're working on a hydrant that's frozen. Our couplings are all frozen."

Firefighters managed to secure sources of water, even drawing it directly from the Passaic River. Water from the firehoses formed icicles in the cold. The firefighters hosed the building with more than a million gallons of water per minute, according to Trentacost. "We're utilizing all resources of water," he said during a live event on Facebook with Mayor Hector Lora.

During the fire, one section of the building collapsed, and firefighters were concerned about structural problems in other areas. The fire also halted traffic on nearby Route 21.

Had the fire reached the section of the main chlorine plant that stores the largest concentration of chemicals, mass evacuations would have been necessary. But the firefighters were able to control the blaze before it could reach that area. Nevertheless, officials urged residents to keep their windows closed on Saturday

night.

“This would have been the worst fire I’ve experienced, because of the potential and the adverse impact it would have had on our community and the communities around us,” Lora told NJ.com. He expressed uncertainty about where residents could have been housed safely in the event of an evacuation, given the pandemic.

By 11 a.m. Saturday, the fire had been downgraded to a four-alarm response as firefighters worked to control it. Almost 24 hours elapsed before the fire was contained. Demolition of the building began on Saturday evening, and Trentacost expected that the firefighters’ job would be complete on Monday morning.

No major injuries were reported. One firefighter was transported to the hospital with a laceration to the face. He was treated and released. About 18 firefighters slipped on the ice and sustained minor injuries.

Governor Phil Murphy sent environmental and emergency management officials to Passaic. The US Environmental Protection Agency also sent officials who set up five air monitors to measure for chlorine. The officials have so far said that the air quality is acceptable.

Although officials did not consider the fire suspicious, its cause remains to be investigated. An increased use of space heaters in the cold weather had caused fires at other plants in the area, Lora told the *New York Times*. Whether a space heater caused Friday’s fire is unclear.

On January 29, 2021—just under a year ago—a nine-alarm fire destroyed the Atlantic Coast Fibers recycling plant in Passaic. Conditions were similarly cold and icy, and firefighters worked overnight to put out the fire. At least two explosions occurred at the site, and the fire destroyed an entire city block. One person was injured and 70 workers were evacuated.

Passaic’s worst fire occurred on Labor Day, 1985. It started in a warehouse that stored kerosene and diesel fuel and spread through four city blocks, destroying 21 factories that were a century old, 17 apartment buildings and several homes. Passaic lost about 20 percent of its remaining industrial base, and a firefighter from nearby Secaucus was killed.

These fires occur too frequently to be considered accidents. Rather, they are social crimes. Business

owners and municipal and state officials have repeatedly failed to put the necessary safeguards in place to protect the city’s working class residents. These disasters, and the storing of dangerous chemicals in residential areas, show the callous indifference of the ruling class to workers’ lives. They are an expression on a smaller scale of the same criminality that is manifest in the state’s response to the pandemic.



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