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Fire burns commercial processing plant

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RECORDER PHOTO BY CHIEKO HARA

Fire burns commercial processing plant

Tulare County firefighters fight a commercial-structure fire at Tuff Stuff Products on Thursday at 9600 Road 256 in Terra Bella.



Tuff Stuff is bordered by a fertilizer plant behind it to the east and America Go Green Recycling to the north.

Tuff Stuff Products manufacture and distribute worldwide an extensive line of poly stock tanks, feeders, storage drums, buckets, containers, rubber stall mats and specialty hand trucks.

Some of the workers were having lunch inside the company's main building, which is adjacent to the production area, when the fire began.

"We heard through the radio to start calling the fire department," said employee Hector Rodriguez. "They tried to

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By EMILY SHAPIRO

TERRABELLA—A fire at a processing plant east of Terra Bella sent a thick, black plume of smoke into the cloudy skies that could be seen for miles.

Workers from Tuff Stuff Products escaped to the parking lot across of a bar across the street and watched as firefighters battled the blaze that erupted shortly before 1 p.m. Thursday afternoon. It consumed a large number of plastic bundles and a 30-foot by 50-foot metal building used in the production process at the plant on the corner of Avenue 96 and Road 256.

The fire was totally suppressed by 6 p.m., said County Battalion Chief Mke Green.

Jose Ceballo said he was one of seven workers on the production line when the fire broke out.

"All of a sudden fire started coming out of the ceiling. That's how everything started," said Ceballos. "It started spreading."

The Tulare County Fire Department, the Porterville Fire Department and CalFire responded to the commercial structure fire. In all, five engines, three water tenders, three trucks and four overheads were used to attack the fire from three fronts.

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stop it using fire extinguishers but it got too big.”

Between 15 and 20 employees were working when the fire broke out, Rodriguez said.

“Fortunately, everyone got out safe,” Rodriguez said.

Before exiting, Rodriguez said workers cut the power at the main breaker. Power lines were eventually downed by the fire, but by then Southern California Edison had cut power to the plant and in doing so to some of the surrounding homes.

The pile of plastic bundles was roughly 60 feet by 12 feet by 14 feet, Green said. The metal building collapsed in on itself.

Company owners and senior management declined to comment.

Rodriguez did not know if they would be out of jobs due to the fire.

There was a report of an explosion but that could not be confirmed by fire officials, workers or people who live in the area.

“I heard a lot of popping and banging and so I walked outside to see what was going on,” said Earl Keen, who lives next to the Hoot N Holler, the nearby bar where employees retreated from the fire. “I saw a lot of smoke and could see she was gone. “It’s a terrible thing, especially for the workers during this time of year.”

Another neighbor, Keith Long, said that he was the first to call 911.

“I was watching the Weather Channel when my wife came in and said, ‘Quick, fire, fire.’ I ran out there and called 911,” said Long. “The smoke was about 400 feet.”

Firefighters managed to keep the fire from spreading to the main building or any of the surrounding businesses or homes. Though there were concerns about environmental hazards, residents were not evacuated.

About an hour in, they began to use fire-suppressing foam and began to knock down and eventually contain the fire. Shortly after 2 p.m., the fire was producing significantly less smoke.

“It is a tactical response to a fire involving plastic products. Once you put foam on you basically put out the fire,” said Green.

The agencies were limited by the amount of water as there were only two fire hydrants near the plant. Water trucks reloaded tanks at a fire hydrant in front of Zion Lutheran School.

The cause or origin of the fire was unknown, Green said. The investigation would begin after the fire was mopped up.

The facility used to be an old orange packing house before becoming Tuff Stuff. Green was not surprised by the extent of the fire and amount of smoke it put out.

“We’ve always known that if it were to catch fire it would be a significant fire,” Green said.

Brian Williams contributed to this report.

Contact Emily Shapiro at 784-5000, ext. 1050, or on Twitter @EmilyShapirogar

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