

Morris fire evacuation extended as firefighters make progress battling industrial blaze

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Evacuation order for 1,000 homes continues until 9 p.m. Thursday

By Diane Pathieu



MORRIS, Ill. (WLS) -- A massive industrial fire at an abandoned paper mill in Morris continued to burn for a third day Thursday, as crews use new tools to try to put it out.

While progress has been made in fighting the fire, officials said the evacuation order will remain in place until 9 p.m. Thursday due to the toxic fumes and smoke emanating from the building, stemming from as many as 200,000 lithium batteries exploding.

"We're making headway on it," said Chief Tracey Steffes on Wednesday, with the Morris Fire Protection & Ambulance District. "We still have fumes coming out of the building, but nothing like it was this morning."

Firefighters believed thousands of pounds of lithium have burned out, allowing heavy machinery to tear off portions of the still burning building.

"They took that machine and stripped the front of that building of 150 feet of siding, which gave us our first look inside the building and what we were dealing with," Steffes said.

Still hesitant to add water to explosive burning batteries, firefighters tried a dry chemical.

"We brought over 1,000 pounds of Purple-K and we introduced that to the fire hoping we could kill it and choke it out," Steffes said. "The lithium fire laughed at the Purple-K. Didn't put a dent in it."

Steffes said a local concrete company is bringing a pump and 28 tons of dry cement that will be used to cover a "trouble spot" of burning batteries. The batteries are about 3 feet deep, covering an area of about 30 feet by 40 feet.

"We're gonna cover that with dry Portland cement in order to smother that fire, but we're using the water to cool down the batteries, so once we put the Portland cement on top, we're hoping that's gonna smother it," Steffes said.

Steffes said he has consulted with experts throughout the day on how to fight the fire without making it more of an environmental problem than it already is.

"I hope we can smother this thing in the next two hours," Steffes said Wednesday evening.

The blaze started just before 11:45 a.m. Tuesday at the old Federal Paper Board facility in the 900-block of East Benton Street.

"These batteries range in size of a cell phone to a little bigger than a car battery. As they get wet, they short out and they ignite and explode. That is the problem we are having," Steffes said. "The biggest hazard we have is the smoke and fumes as well as the gas from the fire. Highly poisonous and very deadly."

Morris Mayor Chris Brown said the city was not aware of the batteries.

Morris Mayor Chris Brown said the city was not aware lithium batteries were being stored at a warehouse that is now the site of a massive fire.

"To our understanding, we were unaware of the batteries in the warehouse and only came upon it when the firemen started to do their work and push water onto the fire; they've been taking all the precautions necessary to make sure everything is safe and contained," he said.

The building's owner Jin Zheng said he was on the scene minutes after the fire started, but he was unable to get inside. He said the thick black smoke coming from the building was fueled by explosions of thousands of lithium batteries he had inside.

Zheng said he was storing supplies in the 70,000-square-foot warehouse because he was planning to open a solar power business by the end of the year.

"I have to say sorry," Zheng said.

Zheng said he has lost his life savings in the fire. He planned to get insurance after he opened the business. He also planned to have repairs done to the building's roof later this week, and he believes water dripping onto the batteries could have sparked the explosions and fire.

"It's not that lithium battery fires are new, it's just this quantity is something that hasn't been experienced, at least regionally here," Steffes said.

Tuesday's fire comes less than one month after the massive blaze at the Chemtool grease plant in Rockton. Special resources still in the area from that fire are now being utilized in Morris.

Officials evacuated the southeast side of Morris.

"We have determined that people will not return to their homes until the fire is much more controlled, if not completely out," said Michelle Pruin, with the Grundy County Health Department.

With ever-changing conditions, flames still roaring and toxic chemicals possibly seeping out into the air, families are out of their homes for at least another night.

"We don't have clothes, we don't have what we need here," evacuee Ana Luna said. "Pretty much we are just waiting to see."

Luna's family is sheltered where she works at a nearby Holiday Inn. She ran home and grabbed her kids Tuesday at a moment's notice.

"I have a lot of things at home that I need here but I didn't bring it because I didn't have enough time to pack everything," Fabian Luna added.

They're making the best of it, celebrating grandma's birthday huddled in a hotel room.

The Illinois EPA is monitoring air quality from several locations around town. At this point, they are planning no further evacuations. Steffes said Wednesday that air quality tests were "favorable."

The Grundy County Sheriff's Office said they are assisting with the response and the evacuations. The Grundy County Administration Building at 1320 Union St. is being used as a reception area.

Officials are asking that residents self-evacuate if they see or smell smoke and then report where that took place.

"It's a little scary, especially because we don't know what got in our house," evacuated resident Areli Soberano said.

Residents wanting to report smoke or smell or ask questions about shelter or the evacuation instructions may call 815-941-3408.

"We are going to be here for the long haul," Steffes said.

The Red Cross is supplying food and water to the more than 300 first responders battling the fire. Red Cross volunteers are also working to set up a reception center and shelter for those who have been evacuated at First Christian Church, 455 W. Southmor Road in Morris.

An update is expected from Morris officials at noon Thursday.

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