

Chemical spill drill tests local emergency workers

By Jake Berg
Oregon Daily Emerald

It could have been worse. Besides the two firefighters who ran out of oxygen while in Klamath Hall rescuing victims, there were no immediate casualties as the result of a chemical spill outside of Onyx Bridge Sept. 9.

After all, the chlorine that leaked into the wind or liquid waste that seeped into the Eugene Millrace could have brought as many as 10 to 15 casualties, said Chuck Campbell, a Eugene deputy fire marshal.

It could have been real, but, as the police radio kept crackling all morning, "This is a drill. This is a drill."

What the Eugene fire department — along with many other public agencies participating in a drill conducted by the Associated Lane Emergency Response Team — was doing was testing itself on how prepared it was for such an emergency. All agencies involved treated the scene as if it were a real situation.

"This could happen any time," Campbell said.

After a forklift operator dropped barrels of a flammable liquid outside of Onyx Bridge, leakage began. When the forklift driver started his engine, a spark ignited the material, causing an explosion.

The explosion knocked over a tank of chlorine gas that sat on the Onyx loading dock. The tank began to leak gas into the air, creating a large hazard to the area, particularly Klamath Hall, which had the gas creep into the building's air intake system.

Injured in the incident were the forklift operator, another University worker, and two University Office of Public Safety officers who were knocked down after running into the chlorine gas.

OPS Associate Director Tom Hicks, who helped organize the drill, played the role well.

"We had a couple of unanticipated casualties," Hicks said.

Campbell was a bit more serious.

"These two people came in, and they made the wrong decision," Campbell said of the OPS officers. "Bingo — down for the count."

But that is what the drill was all about — to learn what needed to be done (and what needed to be done better) in a situation like this. Campbell said that overall, the



A rescue worker tends to the injured forklift driver who dumped flammable liquid during a drill at Onyx Bridge.

agencies performed the drill well.

"This isn't a bunch of kids playing with their big red toys," he said. "They were very methodical. They weren't racing around."

Emergency workers took the victims of the explosion and the leakage through a decontamination process, and even showered themselves to avoid the spread of anything.

Campbell said the drill takes place annually, and that the University volunteered to offer Onyx Bridge as the drill site. He said letting the agencies test a site, as the


University did, is taking a risk.

"I'm impressed," Campbell said, "because you're kind of opening up your guts."

Traffic on Franklin Boulevard was narrowed to two lanes during the drill, and drivers passing by looked on in wonder at the drill. So did pedestrians and bike riders, who often blindly went through the drill site without much regard to the situation.

"We had a few stragglers come through," he said.

"We discussed it — we weren't going to take them down for a drill."


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