

# Firefighters in Hermiston quell blaze of the decade

Boiler explodes, sends seven to Hermiston hospital

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East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Dozens of firefighters from multiple agencies worked Tuesday afternoon, Feb. 22, to quell a fierce blaze at Shearer's Foods off Highway 207 in Hermiston.

Employees of Shearer's Foods called 911 at 12:51 p.m., Tuesday, Feb. 22, according to the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office, and reported a boiler explosion with possible injuries. Umatilla County Fire District No. 1, Hermiston, was the first fire department on the scene.

"This was a big fire for us," Fire District No. 1 Chief Scott Stanton said. "Probably haven't had a fire this size in the last decade."

A total of 60 firefighters from Fire District No. 1 and eight other agencies responded.

The blaze destroyed a warehouse and whatever was inside, Stanton said, but crews were able to keep the fire from spreading.

Having enough water was the primary challenge, he explained. The site had one fire hydrant, and the water tenders at the scene ran low.

"We had too much fire load and not enough water tenders to take care of that like we should," he said.

But given the size of this fire, he added, maybe even 30 water tenders would not have been enough.

And there always is the issue of response times in Eastern Oregon given the distances between communities. Still, firefighters subdued the blaze in a matter of hours.

Smoke from the fire also presented problems.

"We had to evacuate a hotel and some houses downwind," he said.

Stanton also said the hazmat team from Gresham was coming over to monitor water runoff.

## Witnesses share their experiences

As the fire raged, a line of cars exited Feedville Road. Authorities ushered the cars away from Shearer's Foods and the source of the smoke. Then, they blocked the road to anyone wanting to enter. Some Shearer's employees, though, left by foot to meet nearby friends and loved ones for rides.

Nick Perez, forklift operator, was one of the walkers. As he left to meet a friend, he spoke of the incident that engulfed his workplace in fire.

He said he was in a different part of the building from the explosion.

"It felt like a hurricane or a tornado came throughout the whole warehouse," he said. "It blew dust everywhere. I saw the roof collapse. There was a bunch of fire. That's when everyone evacuated."

When he left the building, he could not retrieve his car keys, which is why he said he was meeting a friend, Cory Harris, to give him a lift.

Harris, a warehouse worker at Shearer's, said he had the day off of work and was glad for that. He had seen fires there before, he said, but nothing like this. He expressed concern for the people who were there



Erick Peterson/East Oregonian

Forklift operator Nick Perez walks away from Shearer's Foods, Hermiston, following an explosion and fire Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022.



Nickolas Oatley/Umatilla County Fire District 1

A firefighter with the Umatilla County Fire District 1 battles the blaze at Shearer's Foods, Hermiston, on Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022.

wand worry about what this meant for his employment.

Art Moreno was on the side of the road and said he was waiting on his wife, Jonnie Moreno, who was on her way.

When she arrived, he met her with a hug and a tarp to warm her.

"I'm all right. I'm all right," she said to her husband. Then she shared a few words about her ordeal.

"Most of the girls were terrified," she said.

As for herself, she said she was not frightened but worried for other workers. Some of her co-workers, she said, were affected by smoke and minor injuries.

## Local agencies address the emergency

Caitlin Cozad, communications director for Good Shepherd Medical Center, Hermiston, said the hos-

pital received seven patients from Shearer's Foods. All were in stable to fair condition, she reported, and "none are critical or serious at this time."

Union Pacific Railroad was notified to close down traffic on the nearby rail line. The Oregon Department of Transportation closed Highway 207 south of Hermiston between Feedville Road and the Space Age truck stop near Interstate 84 Exit 182 due to the emergency.

Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 is the primary fire agency for the fire and has set up a command post, according to a press release from the sheriff's office. The fire district also requested mutual aid from surrounding fire agencies. The initial information is the cause of the explosion and fire is a nat-

ural gas portable boiler. The sheriff's office urged the public to avoid the area. Hermiston City Manager Byron Smith said the fire at the company could have a significant impact on the community.

"There are a lot of people who work there," he said. "It will be a big challenge for us."

Hermiston Mayor Dave Drotzmann called the explosion and resulting fire tragic for the company and the Hermiston community.

"We hope for the employees that have been injured a speedy recovery," he said. "For the families that are affected, Hermiston will work with our partners at the county, state and federal levels to bring

resources as soon as possible to support them as they work through this tragedy."

## Not the first emergency at Shearer's

The Ohio-based Shearer's Foods bought snack food manufacturer Snack Alliance in 2010 and took over its Highway 207 facility.

After securing a tax break from the city of Hermiston's enterprise zone, Shearer's made several expansions to its facility from 2010 to 2014, developments valued at more than \$30 million. Shearer's did not immediately return questions about the size of its presence in Hermiston, but a Shear-

er's manager told the East Oregonian in 2013 that the plant employed 325 people. In 2014, the potato processor announced it was hiring an additional 114 employees.

This is not the first major emergency at Shearer's. In late September, Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 dispatched a hazardous materials team and other emergency responders to a chemical leak at the Shearer's plant. Three people were transported to Good Shepherd while another two refused transport. Once authorities were able to identify the source of the leak and stop it, Shearer's was allowed to reopen the following day.



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