

# Blaze: 'It felt like a hurricane or a tornado came throughout the whole warehouse'

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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 down wind," 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 and 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



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A firetruck Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022, works to douse a fire at Shearer's Foods near Highway 207 in Hermiston.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

The smoking rubble of Shearer's Foods reflects in the layer of water from fire hoses Tuesday, Feb. 22, 2022, in Hermiston.

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.

## 73 employees evacuated

Umatilla County Fire

District No. 1 was the primary fire agency for the fire and 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 sheriff's office reported the cause of the explosion and fire was a natural gas portable boiler.

The fire district on Feb. 23 reported 73 employees evacuated the warehouse. Six were injured and taken to Good Shepherd Medical Center, Hermiston, where they were treated and released.

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.

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 Shearers family 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 Shearer'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.

# Crashes:

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said they were going to stop at the rest area at Deadman Pass, near milepost 229, when he saw jackknifed semitrailers on the road ahead.

"I kind of swerved," he recalled. "I was able to miss a couple of cars and trucks."

But he tapped the brakes, he said, and lost control of the car.

The front of their Nissan smashed into the rear driver's side of an Amazon semitrailer. The collision tore apart the front of the car, and the engine ended up on the asphalt.

But the Nissan's safety features worked well, Carter said. The air bags, seat belts and crumple zones protected the family.

"We're all pretty much fine," Marjorie said.

The Hyatts were part of a massive pileup crash that began at around noon near milepost 230, stretched 1.75 miles and involved more than 170 vehicles, according to press releases from the Oregon Department of Transportation and Oregon State Police.

OSP on Feb. 22 reported 17 patients were transported from the crash scene with an additional two who were transported after they arrived at Pendleton Convention Center, which served as a reunification hub for people in the crash. But despite the crash's scale, authorities as of Feb. 22 have not reported any deaths.

Interstate 84 shuts down

The site of the crash, about 20 miles east of Pendleton, was experiencing inclement conditions around the time of the crashes.

The series of wrecks shut down the westbound and eastbound lanes of the freeway in Eastern Oregon. Eastbound remained closed Feb. 21 between Exit 216, 6 miles east of Pendleton, and Exit 265 at

## BY THE NUMBERS

The series of crashes that created a massive pileup Monday, Feb. 21, on the westbound side of Interstate 84 about 21 miles east of Pendleton also drew a massive public safety response. Here's a breakdown of relevant figures from the emergency:

**1.75 miles:** Length of the crash zone on the westbound side of Interstate 84, about 21 miles east of Pendleton.

**170:** Number of vehicle involved in the crashes.

**71:** Number of people transported from the site to the Pendleton Convention Center.

**17:** Number of people taken from the crash site to local hospitals. Two more later left from the convention center to go to a hospital.

**1:** Number of injured who required an emergency flight to Oregon Health & Science University, Portland.

**0:** Number of fatalities.

**12:** Number of agencies that responded to the crashes, including Oregon State Police, Umatilla County Emergency Management and the Pendleton Fire Department.

**6:** Number of tow companies that responded.

Source: Oregon State Police

La Grande, while westbound was closed to between Exit 374 at Ontario and Exit 216.

Between the crash early afternoon Feb. 21 and early morning Feb. 22, when the Oregon Department of Transportation reopened the eastbound lane of Interstate 84, Oregon State Police, several local agencies and a "half-dozen tow companies" removed the dozens of vehicles that had accumulated on the snowy road, according to an OSP press release.

ODOT announced on Feb. 22 the eastbound lanes reopened at about midnight, but the westbound lanes were not clear until about 6 a.m.

"Outstanding response from our tow companies and all who responded, including law enforcement and EMS," ODOT District 12 Manager Marilyn Holt said in a statement. "They got everyone out fast, which made clearing the scene go well."

Oregon State Police, local law enforcement, fire and medics from agencies throughout Umatilla and Union counties responded to the crashes, along with help

from Walla Walla County in Washington. The Hyatts described the emergency response as impressive.

Officers at the crash could hear crashes occurring behind them, according to a press release from the OSP. The Hyatts heard those crashes, too.

"Bam, bam, bam," Carter Hyatt said. "They just kept hitting."

Marjorie said the sounds were unnerving. They stayed in their vehicle, even without heat, for protection.

Capt. Merle Laci with the La Grande Fire Department said eight personnel, two ambulances and one rescue rig went to the crash. La Grande Fire confirmed it transported three individuals from the scene to Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande.

Nick Oatley, spokesperson with Umatilla County Fire District No. 1, confirmed the Hermiston-based fire department also responded, sending three ambulances to the scene. Good Shepherd Medical Center, Hermiston, reported it did not receive any crash victims.



Oregon State Police/Contributed Photo

Vehicles pile up at part of a mass crash Monday, Feb. 21, on the westbound side of Interstate 84 about 21 miles from Pendleton. Oregon State Police reported 170 vehicles in all were involved in crashes along almost 2 miles of the freeway and 17 people were injured. But as of Feb. 22, state police have not reported any fatalities from the crashes.

## Hospitals at the ready

Elaine LaRochelle, incident commander at Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande, activated the hospital's incident command system, according to a press release from Mardi Ford, public information officer.

"We are preparing to support any patients sent our way with emergency services and medical care," Ford said in the release. "We do not have any news on distribution of patients to be sent our way. However, we are prepared to assist in this emergency. We are cooperating fully with all regional partners, including our media contacts, to do what we can to keep everyone informed. Our primary mission, however, is to provide emergency services and medical care to patients in need. Once we know more, we will issue an update."

St. Anthony Hospital communications director Emily Smith said the hospital received 13 patients. Of those patients, 10 were treated and released, two were admitted but later discharged and one was transferred to another hospital.

Smith also extended grati-

tude to the emergency personnel who responded to the scene.

"It was definitely a team effort and we are grateful for those who were able to assist," she wrote in an email.

Smith also explained how St. Anthony responds to these kinds of crises.

"When we receive word of an incident like this, the hospital activates Code D, or disaster response," according to Smith. "Available staff (off-duty) are called and asked to come in based on current personnel needs as well as staffing for the next shift. Patients are seen in the Emergency Department as well as other care areas of the hospital as appropriate for their level of injury. We have an extensive disaster plan that is drilled with local emergency response teams to ensure we are prepared for situations like this when they arise."

## Pendleton Convention Center provides respite

The Hyatts said emergency personnel checked on them often, and they appreciated that. And many of the other people in the crash helped each other, they said, offering water and making

sure people were OK.

"There were people, regular people," Marjorie Hyatt said. "All that was really nice."

When school buses arrived to carry the Hyatts and so many more off the mountain, they said they had to cross the median to the eastbound lanes. Marjorie banged her knee on the fence, but firefighters were right there to help. And when they got on the bus, she said, the Oregon State Police trooper, who was the person who had checked on them, assisted them onto the bus.

The buses took groups to the Pendleton Convention Center, where its manager, Pat Beard, said while the facility was holding events that day, it opened rooms for the people in the crash and provided what hospitality it could while they waited for rides from family or friends or made arrangements for other accommodations.

The center also served as something of a base of operations for law enforcement, Umatilla County Public Health and more. Beard praised the coordination he witnessed between the different groups.

The Hyatts were among the last from the crash to still be at the convention center that evening. Bags of chips and other snacks lined the long tables of the large room they were in. A family member was on the way to help get them home, they said, probably around 7 that night.

The Nissan, as far as they knew, still was at the site of the crash. Carter said all their luggage was in the car, so he anticipated making a trip back to gather their belongings.

The Hyatts said they had never experienced anything like this emergency, and they did not want to be in another. But their concerns were for others.

"I hope everyone gets out," Marjorie said.