

## Fire

Continued from Page A1

the fire was at its worst, the walls remained, he said. According to Davis, this situation made it so firefighters had difficulty reaching certain sections.

This was not the only problem firefighters faced, Davis said, and firefighters pulled out of the scene at around 10 p.m. Feb. 22.

"We weren't making much progress," the operations chief said.

Water valves on the fire trucks were freezing in the cold temperatures. Firefighters were "exhausted and cold," too, he said.

There were 73 firefighters at the scene, according to Davis. These firefighters came from "all over" Umatilla and Morrow counties. Nineteen firefighters, he said, worked on water shuttles, bringing much-needed water to the fire.

The engine to the pump of the facility's water supply broke, he said, and there was only one hydrant firefighters could access on the road. The lack of water was significant in the attack on the blaze.

"We knew we weren't going to be able to put it out," he said.

Firefighters worked to protect large tanks on the property that store chemicals, he said, and firefighters held the flames back from nearby totes that also contained flammable materials.

"We were able to keep it away from that," he said. "That was the big thing."

The Shearer's Foods explosion could have been even worse, he said, especially when considering air quality.

"Don't get me wrong, whatever was in there and burned was putting up some nasty stuff," he said.

Looking at the wreckage of Shearer's, Davis said the fire had "burned through a lot of what could burn."

### The work on Feb. 23

Davis said he left Shearer's at 2 a.m. on Feb. 23. He woke at 6 a.m. to take his children to school and begin Day 2 at the fire scene. By 10 a.m., he was able to acquire an excavator and bring it to the site. Four or five firefighters were with him.

"Today, we're just working on tearing down these walls and trying to get what we can on the outside," he said, motioning to twisted



Umatilla County Fire District No. 1 firefighters sift through the wreckage Wednesday, Feb. 23, 2022, to put out remaining fires from an explosion the day prior at Shearer's Foods, Hermiston.

Erick Peterson/East Oregonian



Snow was on the ground Thursday, Feb. 24, 2022, as workers continued to clear rubble from Shearer's Foods after a major fire there Feb. 22.

Erick Peterson/East Oregonian

remains at the scene.

The one firetruck on the scene followed the excavator, as firefighters put water on remaining hot spots. Davis said they would not be able to put out the fires entirely.

"It's not going anywhere," he said. "At this point, we're just trying to get to some of the stuff that's producing the darker, nastier smoke and put it out."

He said he was looking forward to being able to leave the site and go home at 4 p.m.

Meanwhile, the state fire marshal and police were investigating the cause of the explosion, Davis said, and interviews were taking place that day.

After firefighters cleared enough of the site to make it safe, investigators would be able to enter the grounds, he stated.

"That's where it's at," Davis said.

"I think we still have a good idea that it was a boiler explosion."

He also expressed relief that people escaped the fire with few injuries. He credited Shearer's for a successful evacuation, as well as a full account of personnel. Because Shearer's was able to account for their workers, firefighters did not have to search the fire for victims.

"That took a huge weight off our shoulders," he said.

### Shearer's assesses next steps

Shearer's Foods commented on the fire with an email and a press release.

"Currently, we do not have a thorough understanding of the extent of damages to our facility or the impact on our business. As a result, we are still determining the full package of support for our teammates," Joline Man-

ning, Shearer's Foods chief human resources officer, stated in an email. "Their wellbeing is important to us; we have created a centralized location for our employees to gather and gain access to resources. To assist them in processing this event we have established (employee assistance program) services immediately."

She stated Shearer's 230 employees from the Hermiston plant site were accounted for and safe.

"We do intend to take care of our Shearer's family," she stated, adding "senior leaders are present in Hermiston supporting our teammates and gaining an understanding of the impact of the fire and planning our next steps."

"We are committed to providing assistance for all impacted employees and will do everything we can to limit the impact of the fire on our team members and the local community," Shearer's stated Feb. 23 in a press release. "We would like to thank the emergency responders and our local team for their efforts."

### Government commits to help

Government officials voiced their sympathy for the situation and their opinions on what this will mean for those affected.

Hermiston Assistant City Manager Mark Morgan said the city has been in touch with Shearer's corporate leadership.

"They're still assessing what they think they've got here — what's salvageable and how they can proceed," he said. "They're a good business that has a need for

keeping things in operation, so I think they'll be doing everything they can to have things up and running as fast as they possibly can."

Morgan added the city will find what it can do and expressed confidence that other levels of government — county, state and federal — will be part of this effort, too.

"It's a primary job creator in the sense, without them, there are other dominoes," he said.

The 230 employees at Shearer's in Hermiston, then, are not the only people affected. Also, there are potato suppliers, planters, harvesters, truckers and marketers who are hurt.

"There are the people inside the plant, but this has a ripple effect," Morgan said.

In addition to speaking with Shearer's corporate employees, Morgan said city officials have been in touch with county commissioners, congressional representatives and U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden. All these government officials, he said, expressed their support for returning Shearer's to shape.

Umatilla County Commissioner John Shafer in an email to EO Media Group stated Shearer's is a large employer in the region and an important business in Umatilla County.

"Shearer's Foods is a vital part of Umatilla County," he said. "We are working with the city of Hermiston, Shearer's Foods, federal officials and many community partners to do everything we can to make sure the workers are taken care of. ... We want to do everything in our power to make sure that Shearer's and their employees are back working as soon as possible."

A representative of Wyden's office stated the senator met with Shafer and tweeted a response.

"The impact from the Shearer's Foods explosion cuts deeply in Hermiston," Wyden tweeted. "My thoughts are with the victims, and I'm thankful for the first responders on the scene. I've told @UmatillaCounty Chair John Shafer that I stand ready to help in any way I can to recover and rebuild."

Morgan expressed some optimism about rebuilding.

"There may be some salvageable core pieces out there," he said.

Shearer's has a long road ahead to get back to where it was before the fire, Morgan said, but it is possible and the city is committed to helping.

**Madden Realty would like to thank all of our clients that made our first year in business a success. We look forward to helping past and future clients to realize their real estate dreams in 2022.**

**- Joshua, DeAnn, Lindsey & Michal**



Licensed in the State of Oregon

Check out our website at [WWW.MADDENREALTYEASTERNOREGON.COM](http://WWW.MADDENREALTYEASTERNOREGON.COM)