

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2017



Fire, gas, smoke rip through warehouse district

by Mike Irwin | June 29, 2015, 8:47 p.m.

Public Safety



World photo/Christine Pratt

MORE INFO

Damaged by fire

- Michelsen's Packaging Company, 1105 Hawley St., a manufacturer and distributor of produce packaging and equipment.
- Northwest Wholesale, Inc., 1567 N. Wenatchee Ave., a distributor of ag products and orchard supplies.
- Blue Bird Inc., 1470 Walla Walla Ave., a co-op of fruit growers, packers and shippers.
- Stemilt Growers Miller Street facility, 1610 N. Miller St., packing and shipping of cherries and pears.



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WENATCHEE — Millions of dollars in products and buildings, including high-tech fruit sorting lines, went up in flames Sunday evening in a spectacular blaze that damaged or destroyed four North Wenatchee warehouses and fruit packing facilities and delayed or rerouted trains.

"It's a kind of nightmare," said Dan Beddeson, president of Michelsen Packaging Company, which lost tons of apple trays, wooden pallets and bales of recycled cardboard in the fire.

"We're still assessing the damage."

Two facilities — ag supplier Northwest Wholesale Inc. and fruit company Blue Bird Inc. — were mostly destroyed Sunday by the fire. A cherry and pear packing operation owned by Stemilt also caught fire and was still burning Monday afternoon.

The size, intensity and difficult access to the Stemilt fire kept crews working all day and into the night, Wenatchee Fire Marshal Mark Yapple said. The fire started on the roof of the building but burned into its interior.

"This is going to be a long and extended fight here," Yapple said. "Don't be surprised if the old pattern of us getting to a fire and putting it out in an hour is not going to happen."

Damage assessment at all affected businesses was underway.

Several railroad ties burned on the BNSF Railway main line that passes very near the warehouse fires. BNSF spokesman Gus Melonas said Monday that the company held six trains that would typically run through Wenatchee until the track is repaired. It rerouted other trains through the Columbia River Gorge and Stampede Pass. It wasn't clear late Monday when the line would reopen, Melonas said.



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VIDEO



Stemilt Growers warehouse fire

The railroad brought in a fire-fighting train from Spokane and was using water cars to help supply emergency responders, he said.

Meanwhile, some nearby businesses — hotels, restaurants, convenience stores and others — affected by smoke and acrid fumes were forced Sunday to close early or alert customers to possible evacuations.

On Monday, an ammonia cloud released from one still-burning building brought warnings for businesses and residents south of the warehouse fires to close windows, turn off air-conditioning and remain indoors. Some evacuations were issued before the cloud dissipated at midday.

“It’s up, it’s down, we’re open, we’re evacuating — it’s been crazy,” said Victor Cuevas, manager of the Super 8 Wenatchee hotel, 1401 N. Miller St., who twice recommended that guests evacuate the 102-room hotel, once Sunday night and once Monday morning.

“It’s disruptive,” he said, “ but, in the end, all we care about is the safety of our guests.”

Across Wenatchee’s north business district, many businesses closed Monday afternoon after receiving evacuation notices from fire officials due to the ammonia cloud. Most stores in Valley North Center, Denny’s, Hooked on Toys and, further south, Pybus Public Market and Gold’s Gym shut their doors to ensure customer safety.

First reports of fire in the warehouse district came at around 9:15 p.m. Sunday. Fire officials and company managers believe a burning ember from the Sleepy Hollow Fire may have drifted southeast nearly 2 miles to ignite bales of recycled cardboard in a storage yard at Michelsen Packaging.

By 11 p.m., fire had broken out at Northwest Wholesale and Blue Bird and later at the Stemilt facility. A series of explosions from the buildings rocked the area and could be heard across the Columbia River in East Wenatchee.

Michelsen’s main building wasn’t burned in the blaze, said Beddeson, but did sustain water and smoke damage. Tens of thousands of dollars in company products stacked in the storage yard went up in flames.

“Right now, we not sure of the exact value of the lost stock,” said Beddeson. “We’ll know more in a few days.”

Brianna Shales, spokeswoman for Stemilt, said Monday that fire was burning in the roof of the company’s Miller Street facility, where the fruit shipper packs Rainier cherries, pears and some apples.

“Employees had just left the building after the day’s final shift when the fire was reported,” said Shales. “This morning, we’re just thankful no one was hurt,” said Shales.

Management of Northwest Wholesale and Blue Bird could not be reached for comment Monday. Receptionists at both companies said execs were at the scene of the fires and assessing damage.

Not all businesses suffered from fire, however. After closing early Sunday night, Denny’s reopened at 5 a.m. Monday to heavy breakfast traffic.

“We’re swamped with customers,” said Manager Brian Predmore. “Every looky-loo in town is dropping by for breakfast. We’ve got the best vantage point to see the fire.”

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