Fire Tears Through Chemical Plant Near Detroit

COREY WILLIAMS Associated Press Writer - August 28, 2009
HAMTRAMCK, Mich. (AP) — A fire that started Thursday near a rail tanker car at a chemical plant spread quickly to silos holding gasoline, causing an inferno that sent huge plumes of black smoke billowing into the sky above Detroit and forcing the evacuation of hundreds of people.

The fire at the Sterling Services Ltd. plant in Hamtramck broke out at about 11:30 a.m., and city officials quickly called in help from the Detroit and Highland Park fire departments. Hamtramck is surrounded by Detroit.

A fire is seen at Sterling Services in Hamtramck, Mich., Thursday, Aug. 27, 2009. A fire broke out at the chemical plant near Detroit, sending flames and black smoke hundreds of feet into the air, interrupting Amtrak passenger rail service and forcing hundreds of people to evacuate the area. (AP Photo/Daniel Mears, The Detroit News)

An evacuation order was lifted at mid-afternoon as firefighters worked to put out remaining hot spots.

The company stores gasoline, jet fuel and biofuels at the plant, so authorities evacuated residents from about a half-mile area around the fire, said Kevin Kondrat, executive director of the Hamtramck Housing Commission. That included a nearby complex of 36 buildings containing 300 apartments and some 700 to 800 residents, though Kondrat said not all were home at the time of the blaze.

"The evacuation went very, very, very smooth," he said.

There were no injuries reported, City Manager Bill Cooper said.

He said it wasn't known what caused the spark.

Amtrak passenger rail service was suspended between Pontiac and Detroit, about 20 miles apart. Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari said passengers were shuttled between the cities by charter bus, and the track reopened around 4:20 p.m.

"I saw it burning out of the office window. It's been burning since about 11 o'clock. There were a couple of pops, three pops now," said Tom Lijana, who works at an office about 300 yards from the plant.

Lutalo Sephers, 34, said police used loud speakers on his street to tell residents to leave the area.

"I've lived here over 30 years and this is the first time that we've ever seen anything like this," Sephers said.

An evacuation center was set up at a nearby senior center, Kondrat said, with water available for evacuees. About 75 people were there about 4 p.m., shortly after the evacuation order was lifted.

The plant is in an industrial area with several small factories, and workers from nearby businesses paused to watch the blaze.

Robert McCann, a spokesman for the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, said Sterling Services Ltd. has no history of violations with the state.

The company is registered as a bulk petroleum facility that stores large quantities of gasoline or other fuels, he said.

State or federal environmental officials will monitor air quality at the scene, McCann said.

Sterling Services is a subsidiary of Southfield-based Sterling Oil & Chemical Co. Inc., according to a company Web site. The Hamtramck facility is on more than five acres and has a storage capacity of about 5 million gallons.

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