

## **Sawdust Explosion & Fire Guts Plant**

PINE BLUFF, Ark. (AP) — A fire at a Pine Bluff plant that makes wood products burned up to 850 tons of sawdust but officials said Friday no workers or firefighters were injured.

The fire started at about 5:30 p.m. Thursday with a sawdust explosion that occurred as a loader was working at a storage bin, said John Weaver, controller for the Fiber Resources Inc. plant.

The cause of the fire was still under investigation Friday, Lt. Harold Clark of the Pine Bluff Fire Department. The fire burned well into the night but was out Friday morning.

About 20 workers were on duty, but Weaver told the Pine Bluff Commercial that none were injured. Workers assisted firefighters by moving sawdust from warehouses so the material could be hosed down and by knocking down walls of the metal storage bins so firefighters could reach the blaze with their hoses.

The fire reached the production area but it appeared the facility may be salvagable.

"That's a lot of money," Weaver told the newspaper. "This is going to shut us down for awhile."

Two storage bins were a total loss, he said.

The Fiber Resources Inc. plant produces barbecue wood chips, wood pellets and wood chip animal bedding.

"We suspect that the fire started with (a heavy loader), with some heat or a spark," Weaver said. "There was a sawdust explosion, and it set the bin on fire. We had our workers in there working on it with our fire system, and the (loader) was in there exploding as more parts of it caught fire."

The fire spread to a second storage bin. The plant has a system to extinguish fires, which workers used for about 15 minutes before the system failed, Weaver said. Workers could then only watch as the blaze touched off more and more sawdust until fire trucks began to arrive.

One of the warehouse-like bins was half full with about 400 to 500 tons of sawdust, and the other was about one-third full with 350 tons of sawdust, Weaver said. None of the burned sawdust can be salvaged.

The plant has been in operation since 1982. Large mounds of waste paper are stored at the site, and firefighters battled a blaze in that part of the plant last year.

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Weaver said Thursday's fire was the first time the main plant area had a fire.

Multiple fire departments and volunteer fire departments were on the scene, including: Pine Bluff, White Hall, Altheimer, Wabbaseka, Watson Chapel, Hardin, Linwood, Moscow and Highway 15 South.

Information from: Pine Bluff Commercial, <http://www.pbcommercial.com> [1]

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