

Cliff Collapse Causes Mudslide at Power Plant

DINESH RAMDE, Associated Press

MILWAUKEE (AP) — A section of cliff the size of a football field gave way Monday at a power plant in southeastern Wisconsin, creating a mudslide that sent a pickup truck and other equipment tumbling into Lake Michigan and swept several construction trailers toward the beach.

No injuries or power disruptions were reported, but the U.S. Coast Guard sent rescue boats as a precaution. Officials were conducting an environmental assessment of the situation after finding an oil-like sheen on the water.

"It's most likely fuel, whether gasoline, diesel fuel or hydraulic fluid," said Tom Rosendich, the acting fire chief in the Milwaukee suburb of Oak Creek. "Without guessing, I can't tell you what the quantity is. Whether it's 50 gallons to 1,000 gallons it's hard to say."

The collapse occurred on the southern part of the large We Energies complex in Oak Creek. It happened about 11 a.m. near the older power facilities of the coal-fired power plant, close to where pollution-control equipment is being installed.

Utility spokesman Brian Manthey said all employees were accounted for, including We Energies workers and about 250 contractors.

Manthey said the debris that tumbled into the water included a pickup truck, several pieces of dredging equipment and trailers filled with tools.

He said the incident occurred in an area used for staging, where there usually aren't more than a dozen people.

"We're incredibly fortunate there were no injuries," Manthey said. "That's quite a positive when you realize what happened to the embankment."

One person reported glimpsing the tail end of the collapse, Manthey said, but no one had reported seeing what specifically happened. Investigators are still looking into the cause.

He said utility officials were checking the surrounding area to make sure the soil was stable. However, because the incident happened far enough from where employees work, Manthey said most if not all would be able to return to work Tuesday.

Officials with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Association were assisting in the investigation.

WTMJ-AM reported that the U.S. Coast Guard sent rescue boats to assist with the

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situation. The Coast Guard didn't immediately return a call for comment Monday from The Associated Press.

We Energies officials said they were trying to determine why the bluff gave way, but weather wasn't believed to be a factor.

Spontaneous mudslides that are weather-related generally happen when an area gets 4 to 6 inches of rain in a short time, perhaps leading to flash floods, said Mark Gehring, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service. Southeast Wisconsin hasn't gotten anywhere near that volume, he said.

There were only 1.63 inches of rain in October, almost 1 inch below normal, he said. Another half an inch of rain was forecast to fall on Wednesday.

The Oak Creek power plant occupies more than 400 acres of land on the Lake Michigan shore. It burns about 5,000 to 10,000 tons of coal per day, according to a We Energies fact sheet posted online last year.

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We Energies is a subsidiary of Wisconsin Energy Corp.

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