

Fire At TN Superfund Site

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Firefighters stopped trying to put out a large industrial fire at a federal Superfund site in central Tennessee Wednesday afternoon because of fears that two 1,000-gallon propane tanks there could explode.

Kim Skelton in the Hickman County mayor's office said the fire at Industrial Plastics Recycle started at about 10 a.m. She said surrounding homes, schools and businesses were evacuated.

Tennessee Emergency Management Agency spokesman Dean Flener said that between 400 and 500 people were asked to leave the area, about 45 miles southwest of Nashville. School officials said another 1,800 or so students were evacuated from four nearby schools out of concern over toxic fumes from the blaze.

Jimmy Vest lives about 3 miles from the fire and said the plume of black smoke was blocking out the sun and forming a cloud over his house. The air smelled of burning plastic and ash pieces larger than his hand were falling from the sky into his yard.

"It looks like parts of boxes and plastic," he said. "It's weird. I've never seen anything like it."

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency spokesman James Pinkney said an on-scene coordinator was headed to the site. Federal Superfund sites were created for the cleanup or removal of areas in which hazardous toxic waste was dumped.

The EPA website said the former Wrigley Charcoal Plant, located northwest of Highway 100, was placed on the National Priorities List in 1989 because of contaminated debris, ground water and soil in the county of about 24,000. The Superfund area includes a 35-acre primary site and surrounding areas comprising about 300 acres.

The fire occurred on a portion of the primary site occupied by Industrial Plastics Recycling, a small-scale facility that recycles metals and plastics and has waste product storage.

According to the website, the EPA and the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation have investigated conditions at the property and taken steps to clean up the site "in order to protect people and the environment from contamination." The investigation and clean-up are ongoing.

TDEC spokeswoman Kelly Brockman said state environmental officials will have to wait until the fire is out before they can assess possible public health and environmental implications.

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Skelton said there have not been any reports of injuries, although she said there are a lot of homes near the site.

"We're probably 10 or 12 miles from there, and I can see the smoke from where we're at," she said. "It's pretty high up. It looks like a big, black storm cloud."

According to the EPA website, the Superfund site was home to various industrial operations, including iron, charcoal and wood distillation product manufacturing, beginning in 1880. Contaminants of concern at the site include wood tar chemicals, metals and volatile organic compounds.

Tennessee Emergency Management Agency spokesman Jeremy Heidt said the propane tanks on the site are designed with pressure release valves that should prevent them from exploding, but emergency officials were concerned that the valves might not work. That's why they pulled the firefighters off the scene.

"If they were to explode, the blast radius could be pretty bad," he said. People as far away as 205 meters, about 670 feet, would feel pain from the heat, Heidt said.

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