

Ice plant fire will burn itself out

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The fire at the empty National Ice plant continued to smolder this morning, with black smoke rising out of holes blown into the sides for ventilation by firefighters during a fire there last fall.

Fire Chief Gary Smith said it could be a week before the fire is out. Hoses were set up and half a dozen firefighters stood by, keeping an eye on the small warehouse at the end of the main building.

When the fire started Friday night, the Watsonville Fire Department decided to focus on keeping the fire away from the adjoining Martinelli's warehouse and let the plant burn, Smith said.

There was virtually no way to get at the fire from the back side because of the railroad tracks there, so firefighters had to pull into Coastal Berry Coolers and Granite Construction on the other side and pull hoses across the tracks. At the fire's height, 50 firefighters, including some from Salispuedes and Freedom, worked on the blaze.

Now firefighters are protecting the warehouse on the other end, which is also empty, because there is asbestos in the building materials.

Smith said the department heard from many members of the public, some saying they thought the fire should be put out, and others saying they shouldn't waste the water.

"There was no way to stop it," Smith said.

The building, which had been vacant and stripped of all wiring and insulation, then damaged by the earthquake and earlier fire, had been awaiting demolition. Because of the way the building is constructed — with virtually no ventilation the walls filled with



Kurt Ellison

Watsonville firemen were silhouetted by the flames at the abandoned National Ice and Cold Storage plant early Saturday morning.

cork and plastic foam — Smith said there was just too much of a risk for his men.

"It's like an oven in there," he said.

Six firefighters were injured fighting the fire in the fall.

"They are willing to risk a lot in the line of duty," he said. But, he said, it just wasn't worth the risk for an abandoned building facing demolition.

Smith said this morning that he thinks the fire was "maliciously" set. He could not provide any other details except to say the building had been occupied by drug addicts. He pointed out graffiti on the old plant's wall that

read "Big Fred Wants Gilbert Dead" and "Fred Wants Gilbert to Die Next."

The fire began in the one-story warehouse wedged in between the Martinelli's warehouse and the main three-story building. Smith said the fire had probably been burning for about an hour before it was reported at 11:38 p.m. Friday. With firefighters keeping it from the Martinelli's warehouse, it spread in the other direction through a tunnel into the main building, where it was still smoldering this morning.

Smith said he sent a memo to City Manager Steve Salomon this morning, urging the city to put

pressure on the owners of the building, Memphis-Plough Community Foundation, a non-profit based in Memphis, Tenn., to finish the demolition.

In October, the foundation had heard that FEMA was going to pay for the repairs. The agency later changed its mind, Smith thinks, because of an outcry that public disaster funds were going to be used to tear down an already damaged building.

The building owner is in the process of taking bids on the demolition, Smith said.

Chuck Allen, who represents the owner, was not available for comment this morning.