

APPLE GROWERS FIRE

COLD STORAGE BLAZE CONTAINED

Wildlife officials worry about impact on nearby slough; financial losses in the millions



Fire hoses remain trained on the historic Apple Growers Ice & Cold Storage Co. on Friday.

DAN COYRO/SENTINEL



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Product is removed Friday from the fire-gutted Apple Growers Ice & Cold Storage Co. warehouse.



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Firefighters from agencies throughout the area continue to dump thousands of gallons of water on the cold storage fire in Watsonville on Friday.

By DONNA JONES

djones@santacruzsentinel.com

4-23-11
✓ Fire & Fire Protection - 2000

WATSONVILLE — Just over 48 hours after a fire flared up at Apple Growers Ice & Cold Storage, firefighters dialed down their hoses and Watsonville Fire Chief Mark Bisbee declared the fire contained.

The news, announced about 4 p.m. Friday, came a few hours after firefighters began spraying foam over the smoldering wreckage of the 78,000-square-foot concrete and redwood building and its contents, largely cartons of Martinelli's apple juice and sparkling cider.

Success came with a price, both environmental and financial. But there were no injuries.

"It's not fully controlled. There are still some hot spots," Bisbee said. "But officially, it's contained."

Bisbee said operations would be scaled back Friday and today, leaving only Watsonville firefighters in place by Sunday. At its peak, 16 engines, three ladder trucks and 80 firefighters were on scene of the four-alarm fire, and crews came from as far away as Alameda County.

Mop-up inside the warehouse can't be completed until the exterior walls are braced, work that could start as early as today, Bisbee said.

A private contractor will be hired for the construction work and to clear debris, a job that will taken heavy equipment that the fire department doesn't possess. But Bisbee said firefighters will oversee the cleanup, as well as keep on eye on hot spots.

"If something pops up, we'll hit it hard," Bisbee said.

TACTICAL SHIFT

The turning point for the fire came Friday morning, when firefighters, who had been forced to battle the blaze from outside due to dangerous conditions inside the building, changed tactics. First they narrowed the streams of water being pumped through the roof by ladder trucks and through open doors by hoses on the ground to act as shovels and churn up smoldering debris. Then about 10 a.m. they deployed foam, which soaks in

SEE FIRE ON A2

FIRE

Continued from A1

Then about 10 a.m. they deployed foam, which soaks in more easily than plain water. By 1:30 p.m., the fire had tamped down enough to shut off the foam, and lessen water pumping.

Bisbee said foam wasn't used earlier because of environmental concerns, and because firefighters couldn't save the building and its contents, and because not using foam would ease cleanup.

However, after two days of smoky skies, firefighters reconsidered, though a monitor set up at the fire station on Second Street by the Monterey Bay Air Quality Control District found little to worry about, according to Mike Gilroy, district deputy director. The fire had an impact, he said, but it was mitigated by winds that disbursed smoke and didn't rise to unhealthy levels.

The foam may have exacerbated the stress on fish in nearby Watsonville Slough that already were dealing with soot-filled runoff from the more than 3 million gal-

lons of water — about 50 percent of the average daily use in Watsonville — poured on the fire. The slough is home to several species of fish, including carp, sunfish, bluegill and catfish, according to California Fish and Game warden Steve Schindler. Friday morning, he said fish were distressed, and he expected some to die.

Because the fire must be extinguished, "there's not much we can do at this point," Schindler said.

"We're always trying to balance cost issues, environmental issues, public perceptions, political issues," Bisbee said. "We consider it all and then make decisions."

FINANCIAL TOLL

Bisbee said the exterior frame of the building, though needing shoring, likely can be saved, if owners decide to rebuild the inside and put on a new roof.

Stephanie Phillips, manager of the 83-year-old cold storage facility, said it's too early to think about rebuilding. She's been talking with insurance agents and pulling paperwork together. She said the board of directors — mostly elderly heirs of the 23 growers who founded the company in 1928

— would meet in coming days to begin discussion about the building's future. It's been valued at roughly \$1.9 million.

"They've got a lot to think about," Phillips said. "I don't know if they'll want to start over again."

Board member Bill Resetar, the son of a founder, also couldn't say if Apple Growers would be rebuilt.

"I don't know," Resetar said. "It would be nice to, but it's a little more difficult now to really fill up your storage and get the full use of it."

Today's shareholders in Apple Growers also are far removed from the original business, both in career and location. Some of the minor shareholders live in Croatia.

John Martinelli, president of S. Martinelli & Co., could not be reached Friday. But Wednesday he expressed hopes that the building he uses to store apples and processed product would rise again.

No one was prepared to put a dollar figure on the loss to the building, but Martinelli may have lost \$2 million or more in products when a salvage operation was cut short Thursday after the roof collapsed.

Real estate broker Chuck Allen, who specializes in sales

of agricultural property, said there are about seven cold storage facilities in Watsonville and Pajaro that could pick up the slack left by Apple Growers. But Phillips said none would fit Martinelli's needs as well as Apple Growers, both in terms of convenience and schedule. Martinelli's processing plant is directly across the West Beach Street from Apple Growers.

Phillips said no decisions had been made about Apple Grower's six full-time and two part-time employees, all who have worked for the company for numerous years.

"We have such a good crew," Phillips said. "None of them will have a problem finding work someplace else. Hopefully we can figure out something else."

Bisbee estimated the city had spent \$15,000 to fight the fire as of Friday morning, most of it on overtime for police, public works personnel and firefighters. Since Wednesday, Watsonville firefighters have spent their regular 24-hour shifts at Apple Growers, and then some of them worked a second 24-hour shift manning the two fire stations.

The fire's cause has yet to be determined.