

yesterday.

Firefighters still working on cold-storage plant fire

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Watsonville firefighters worked for nearly 10 hours yesterday to control a smokey three-alarm blaze in an abandoned building on Kearney Street.

Work on the fire, which was in the heart of the old National Ice & Cold Storage Building, continued today, with firefighters planning to blast a hole in a wall to provide more ventilation.

Capt. Chris Johnson said half a dozen firefighters were treated at Watsonville Community Hospital yesterday for injuries sustained while crawling into the building. Three suffered smoke inhalation, one heat exhaustion, and one, Darrell Stoke, received a neck in-

jury when part of a ceiling fell on him, Johnson said.

Fire Chief Gary Smith said that because the building was scheduled for demolition, it was a tough call whether to put the fire out.

He had to weigh the danger to the firefighters against the danger to the community, he said.

"It was a three-story building full of cork, redwood sawdust, ammonia piping and compressor oils," he said.

There was also a petroleum-based asphalt sealant, he said, and with all of these materials surrounded by concrete, the building would have burned for a month if they had let the fire go, he said.

"It would have been a real disruption to the community and at times very toxic," he said.

Firefighters had the advantage of knowing where the fire was and how it had started — workers using electrical tools trying to salvage old pipes sparked the blaze — so Smith decided to take it a step at a time, he said, and to keep fighting the fire "as long as progress was being made and it wasn't beating us back too hard."

Johnson said the call for the fire came in at 1:30 p.m. Firefighters had to go to the second floor through an elevator shaft in rotating teams, crawling through the smoke and darkness to find the fire, which was burning the cork used as insulation inside the walls.

One firefighter described the

conditions inside as "zero visibility."

Teams kept running out of air and having to leave the building, Johnson said, further slowing down the efforts at containment.

Dave Ingersoll and Richard Baca, two employees of Farmer's Cold Storage across the street, said yesterday that the abandoned building had become a "mecca for drug addicts."

"Kids play over there all the time, too," Ingersoll said. "They climb up on the roof and fill the turbans with brick, then drop them on the (corrugated metal) awnings."

Ingersoll said the building was full of dark tunnels that look like mine shafts, winding between the former cold-storage chambers with their 20-foot ceilings.

Not too long ago, Ingersoll and firefighters said, an arson fire was started in some pallets behind the building.

"It's a hazard," Chief Smith said. "We're glad the owners are going to demolish it and get it out of our hair."

Owners of the building had been negotiating with FEMA for funds to demolish it.

Fire departments from Aromas, Salsipuedes, Freedom, Aptos and North Monterey County responded to the blaze. Central Fire in Soquel and the Santa Cruz Fire Department also sent equipment to help.

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Mike McCollum

Weary firefighters, from left, Kirt Vojvoda and Rudy Rangel, of Watsonville Fire, and Greg Hansen and Todd Korver, of Aptos-La Selva Fire, take a break yesterday.