Magna Rebounds Quickly After Devastating Plant Fire

Tom Krisher, AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Part of a Michigan auto parts factory that was damaged by fire last week started producing again over the weekend, easing a parts shortage that had forced two auto companies to shut down some assembly lines.

The fire Wednesday at a Magna International Inc. plant caused General Motors Co. to shut down the Ohio factory that makes the Chevrolet Cruze compact. Mazda Motor Co. halted an assembly line in Flat Rock, Mich., that makes the Mazda 6 midsize sedan. Thousands of workers were temporarily idled.

The Magna plant also makes parts for Chrysler Group LLC, Ford Motor Co. and Nissan Motor Co. vehicles

GM said Monday that the Cruze plant in Lordstown, Ohio, would be restarted on Tuesday, and workers at an adjoining parts stamping plant would be back Monday night. The Mazda 6 assembly line, in a plant jointly operated with Ford, will remain shut down for the rest of this week, a spokesman said.

About half of the Magna plant's production restarted during the weekend, Magna spokeswoman Tracy Fuerst said Monday. Company officials had been working since the blaze to restart production, and were able to get part of the plant in Howell Township, Mich., back in operation, she said. Some machinery also was moved to a shuttered Magna factory in nearby Brighton, Mich., and it is producing parts there temporarily, she said.

"We have begun to supply many of our customers on a limited basis," Fuerst said.

The plant makes ceilings, consoles and other plastic interior parts for the automakers. Nissan, Ford and Chrysler said their production wasn't affected.

Fuerst said some of the molds used to make the parts were damaged, but the company worked with customers over the weekend to repair the equipment at the factory, which is about 45 miles northwest of Detroit.

Only about 25 percent of the factory space was damaged in the fire, but it burned two large holes in the roof of the building and caused structural damage. Fuerst said some of that damage had been fixed. Firefighters, who poured 1.2 million gallons of water on the plant to put out the blaze, have said its cause was accidental, starting in machinery into which foam was injected to make some of the parts.

GM closed its Lordstown, Ohio, assembly plant on Friday and Monday, and at least

six other GM factories were affected by the parts shortage. Officials were still assessing the impact at midday Monday.

The Mazda assembly line also was shut down starting Thursday.

"Lost production will be made up with a combination of overtime and added shifts," spokesman Jeremy Barnes said. Mazda expects to resume production on March 14.

The fire showed just how fragile the auto company parts supply chain is. For the past three decades, companies have cut costs and become more efficient by going to a just-in-time parts delivery system so they can avoid paying for huge stockpiles of parts. To avoid buying costly machinery, many parts companies make a particular part at only one site with no backup. As a result, plants have few parts in storage, and they are so dependent on every link in the chain that the system fails if production is interrupted at a single factory.

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