

Eight-Alarm Tears Through Abandoned R.I. Rubber Mill

WOONSOCKET, R.I. (AP) — A massive, eight-alarm fire tore through a 112-year-old mill in northern Rhode Island on Tuesday, leaving one firefighter injured, forcing some residents to be evacuated and leaving hundreds without power, officials said late Tuesday.

Firefighters were called to a blaze at the former Alice Mills Rubber Manufacturing Plant in Woonsocket, just miles from the Massachusetts state line at about 7:30 p.m. Alice Mills was once considered the largest rubber goods factory in the world.

Woonsocket Mayor Leo Fontaine told WLNE-TV that one firefighter was injured and taken to Rhode Island Hospital where he was treated for what he believes was dehydration. No other details were released, and no other injuries were reported.

The fire quickly spread through the multi-story building and rose to eight alarms. Television images showed the intense fire burning throughout the building, and the entire roof had collapsed into the 217,000 square-foot structure.

"The structure is actually helping us by collapsing inside itself," Fire Chief Gary Lataille told WJAR-TV.

Residents of about 10 houses on two streets surrounding the mill were evacuated, Woonsocket police said.

National Grid spokeswoman Deborah Drew told the Associated Press early Wednesday that power had been cut to 800 customers at the fire department's request. She said fire officials wanted to ensure that firefighters had safe access to the area around the mill building.

At its peak, Alice Mills employed 2,000, and during World War II manufactured barrage balloons and rubber attack boats. The mill was later the home to plastic manufacturer Tech Industries, later known as Portola Tech, which left the building in 2009.

"It's enormous; the entire building is engulfed," Fontaine told WPRI. "It's a very significant building historically for us."

The mayor said the building, built in 1889 on a seven-acre site, had recently been acquired by the American Wood Pellet Corp.

Smoke from the blaze could be seen 10 miles away in Lincoln, R.I., and was being

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

carried by the light wind into parts of Massachusetts.

Authorities said all of Woonsocket's 125 firefighters were on the scene, along with the city's police department. Nearby fire departments in Rhode Island and Massachusetts also sent firefighters.

Lataille told The Providence Journal that the plan was to keep the fire from spreading and to let the structure burn to the ground.

Woonsocket is located 14 miles north of Providence and is two miles from the Massachusetts state line.

Source URL (retrieved on 07/22/2014 - 1:54pm):

http://www.impomag.com/news/2011/06/eight-alarm-tears-through-abandoned-ri-rubber-mill?qt-recent_content=1