

Wyoming Town Evacuated After Gas Explosion

The Associated Press

OPAL, Wyo. (AP) -- Residents and emergency crews were waiting for a fire to burn itself out after an explosion at a natural gas processing plant in a small town in southwestern Wyoming.

No injuries were reported in the explosion Wednesday in Opal, a town of about 95 people about 100 miles northeast of Salt Lake City. All of Opal was evacuated.

Gas from the plant serves a huge number of customers across the West and as far east as Ohio, but the explosion came between the winter heating and summer cooling seasons, when demand is lower, officials said.

There was no immediate word on the cause of the explosion.

The blast was reported at about 2 p.m. and the fire burned into the night. It wasn't clear when residents would be allowed to go home.

"They were downwind from the plant," Lincoln County Sheriff Shane Johnson said. "The fire was still very active, and because of the nature of the processing that goes on there, that was the call that was made for safety reasons."

The explosion occurred in a cryogenic processing tower, which chills unrefined natural gas to remove impurities.

The fire was confined to the facility, and no structures in the town were affected, county officials said.

All employees at the gas processing plant were accounted for, said Tom Droege, a spokesman for Williams Partners LP of Tulsa, Okla., which operates the plant.

Williams was paying to lodge Opal residents at motels in Little America, about 25 miles east, and in Kemmerer, about 15 miles west.

"We want to make sure everybody's taken care of and they're put up for the night if they're not able to go back to their houses," Williams spokeswoman Michele Swaner said.

The Opal plant removes carbon dioxide and other impurities from natural gas that comes from gas fields in the region. It can gather up to 1.5 billion cubic feet of gas a day, and it sends the refined product into pipelines that go to urban centers to the east, west and south.

Williams said in a statement it has suspended collecting gas from surrounding areas and is looking for ways to resume production.

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Regional pipelines converge at a major national hub in Opal, and it's the principal spot where prices are set for natural gas produced from the large gas fields in western Wyoming and the San Juan Basin in Utah. Government officials and industry insiders closely watch Opal hub prices to monitor trends in regional gas supply and demand.

Williams operates the Northwest Pipeline, which runs through Opal on its way to the Pacific Northwest.

Renny MacKay, spokesman for Gov. Matt Mead, said investigators would look into the cause of the explosion once the site was secured.

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