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Tire Warehouse Fire In Torrington

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Connecticut - Investigators Friday were at the scene of a fire that burned close to 12 hours, destroying a tire warehouse and sending thick black smoke billowing over the city. The fire forced the evacuation of neighborhood homes and, at its peak, drew 150 firefighters from several departments.

What was left of the building continued to burn stubbornly into the night Thursday. It was mostly extinguished by 9:15 p.m., but firefighters remained at the scene all night, watching for signs it may re-ignite, fire officials said.

No one was injured. Firefighters kept the flames from spreading to neighboring properties by positioning themselves between houses and the burning building and dousing the area with water, Chief Gary Brunoli said.

It was the longest-running fire Brunoli has seen in his 23 years as a firefighter, he said Friday.

Residents of about 50 homes in the surrounding area were evacuated, and displaced people initially were sent to Coe Memorial Park, Trinity Episcopal Church and the Torrington Armory, fire officials and the American Red Cross said.

They were allowed to return home before 8 p.m. Thursday. The state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection tested the air quality around the homes to determine when it was safe for people to return. Streets that had been closed in the area also reopened around 8 p.m.

Environmental workers were expected to return Friday with cleanup contractors, Brunoli said.

Local and state fire marshals are investigating the cause, but Brunoli said it does not appear suspicious. The probe started before the fire was out, with investigators taking pictures and interviewing people, Capt. David Starr said.

The fire at Toce Brothers Inc. on Taylor Street was reported by an employee at 7:57 a.m., Brunoli said. Fire and heavy smoke were coming through the roof on the north side of the building when firefighters arrived. Large, black clouds of smoke poured from the site for hours and could be seen for miles.

"If what was inside was any indication, I knew we'd be here for a significant amount of time," Brunoli said.

The warehouse, which is owned by O&G Industries and is leased to Toce Brothers, stored tires. A pickup truck and a fork lift also were on the property. Toce Brothers Inc. has a tire store at 143 East Main St.

In addition to evacuating some residents, officials used a reverse 911 call to notify others in the area to ask that they remain indoors.

The fire went to four alarms, requiring four teams of firefighters and equipment, at 8:30 a.m. In addition to the 150 firefighters, representatives of DEEP and state and local fire marshals responded.

Firefighters doused the flames from above using ladder pipes and from the ground with hand lines. More than 1 million gallons of water had been used by the afternoon, Brunoli said.

Firefighters made significant headway around 2 p.m. when they pulled the walls of the warehouse down and managed to spray fire suppression foam directly on the tires, Brunoli said.

Jeff Chandler, a DEEP supervisor, said the agency responded to help with the foam trailers and deal with runoff into the Naugatuck River. Booms were placed in the river and hay bales were placed on the road to collect chunks of rubber and other debris coming off the warehouse property.

Jennifer Ford, who lives on Johnson Street, said she rushed home from a yoga class after receiving text messages from family and friends telling her the street was being evacuated. She wanted to rescue her 100-pound golden retriever and two small dogs that belong to her boyfriend's brother, but the street was blocked and she couldn't get to the house -- until she started crying.

"That's my family; my dogs are my family," she told firefighters. One firefighter went with her and helped her get her dogs out of her building and to her car.

"I want him to know he made such an impact because I was nervous not knowing if my dogs were OK," she said.

Daren and Elena Sileo, who live on New Litchfield Street less than a block from the burning warehouse, said they were not asked to leave their home, but decided to stay with a relative for the night.

"I don't think we'll get much sleep here tonight anyway if all this is going on," Daren Sileo said of her house.

Among the street closed were routes 202 and 800, according to the state Department of Transportation. Route 202 was closed at Albert Street and Route 800 was closed at Palmer Street, the DOT said in an emailed alert.

School officials said they canceled afternoon kindergarten at the Southwest Elementary school because of the fire.

Firefighters from Thomaston, Litchfield, Watertown, New Hartford, Winsted, Danbury and Waterbury are among those who have responded to fight the fire or cover Torrington's fire stations, Brunoli said.

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