

## Firefighters battle spectacular five-alarm blaze in east Stockton

By Joe Goldeen

Stockton Record, Wed., May 27, 2020

STOCKTON — A tenacious fire fueled by an estimated 1,000 plastic crates containing tomato products burned for at least seven hours Tuesday in east Stockton, growing to five alarms as it sent a massive black plume of smoke into the clear morning air visible for miles in all directions.

No structures were involved and no injuries were reported at the Mizkan America tomato-processing plant known for its Ragu and Bertolli pasta sauces near the southwest corner of Waterloo Road and D Street. One firefighter was transported to an area hospital suffering from heat exhaustion, according to the Stockton Fire Department.

Stockton firefighters were initially called out just after 5 a.m. on a report of some crates on fire. They made a quick attack, but the fire continued to grow. Several factors hampered their ability to quickly put out the blaze and that allowed it to spread to the plastic tomato crates in the middle of the pallet yard, according to Deputy Fire Chief Shannon Lewis.

Due to the intense heat put off by the plastic fuel, firefighters had to keep themselves and their equipment at a safe distance, including hosing down their fire engines. The water mains in the county unincorporated area are small and fire hydrants are farther apart, limiting firefighters' access to water, Lewis explained.

Five hours after the fire started, it was still burning intensely when Lewis said, "Our main goal is to keep out of the nearby homes and away from the (tomato) warehouse."

Even with thousands of gallons of water being poured on the fire from several sides, the combination of plastic and tomato product ended up slowing the spread of the fire but making it burn longer, Lewis said.

"It has actually worked a little bit to our advantage," he said.

The smoke from the fire was so significant and prolonged, however, that the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a health caution. People living in the smoke pattern were advised to stay indoors and keep their windows closed.

A representative from Mizkan America was not available Tuesday for comment.

Wayne Burke lives along D Street across from the tomato plant. The heat was so intense, he went outside to use a garden hose to water down the side and roof of his home as well as his trees and plants to keep them cool. When some of the water from his hose landed on the D Street pavement, it immediately turned to steam.

"Now I know what a pig at a luau feels like," Burke said.

Firefighters from Lodi arrived at the scene to help relieve Stockton firefighters while other departments came to Stockton to fill in at fire stations.

A Pacific Gas and Electric Co. crew staged near the fire just in case the heat melted power lines. At one point the fire became so intense that it spawned fire tornadoes, according to a crew member who recorded it on cellphone video. "That's crazy," he said.