

Update - Photos / Structure Fire: Flames destroy local rifle barrel plant

October 25, 2019





Update posted at 9 a.m. Oct. 25

Harbor Fire interim Chief Thomas Sorrentino said the cause of the plant fire remains under investigation.

Previous Pilot coverage posted on Oct. 23

"Thirty-five years of my life went up in this fire," Chris Dichter said.

Dichter is the owner of the Pac-Nor Barreling plant, at 99299 Overlook Road in Brookings and the adjacent 10 acre property. The plant manufactures precision rifle barrels.

Dichter made the comment as he watched flames rolling through the plant, which sits in a wooded area just east of Highway 101.

A heavy black and gray plume from the plant fire, Wednesday morning, Oct. 23, could be seen from the surrounding area.

While fire investigators have not yet released specific details about the cause of fire, Dichter described what he saw as the blaze erupted inside the 7,000 square-foot building.

"We had a part wore out on a lathe and were waiting for a replacement part," he said. "As one of the guys moved the electrical conduit attached to the lathe that comes out of a box in the wall, some sparks flew."

Dichter said other employees pulled the main breaker to cut the power off and shortly after that, fire burst from the wall.

"I'd never seen anything go like that," Dichter said. "It blew up with smoke and fire. It sounded like a tree fell on the plant."

Employees witnessing the incident immediately grabbed fire extinguishers and attempted to put the flames out. Seeing that they could not stop the fire, they all quickly exited the building.

"There were eight or nine of us that got out," Dichter said. "Just like we had trained. Everybody had an assembly point and got out safe. No body got hurt and I congratulated them on that."

Dichter estimated that the building and machinery is valued at between \$4 to \$6 million.

Whether he will rebuild is still unclear.

“I am 66 years-old and I don’t know if I have the time left,” he said. “It took my lifetime to find all the machinery in this plant.”

Dichter opened the plant in 1985. The facility is insured, he said.

The plant supplies customers all over the world.

Harbor Fire intern Chief Thomas Sorrentino said as his crew arrived on scene of the plant fire, they immediately went into a defensive firefighting operation.

“Because the structure was fully involved with fire, we went into a defensive tactic instead of an offensive tactic,” he said. “We were not making entry, staying far back and pouring a lot of water on the fire. This tactic is all about safety. There are other structures and the wild land here that we needed to protect.”

Sorrentino said the most challenging part of controlling the flames and putting out the fire is the lack of water supply in the area. Additional tankers with water were called to the site.

“The closest fire hydrant is about 400 yards down the road and on a steep hill like this, it’s hard to get the water up here,” Sorrentino said.

Loud explosions from the fire could be heard as additional crews arrived on scene to battle the blaze.

Sorrentino said there were propane tanks in the building igniting as the fire and heat spread through the structure.

Multiple fire agencies joined Harbor Fire on scene, including Cape Ferrello Rural Protect District, Brookings Fire & Rescue, the U.S Forest Service, Crescent City and Smith River fire departments. A Cal-Ore Life Flight ambulance crew and Curry County deputy were also called to the fire scene.

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