

Firefighters pouring thousands of gallons on Fresno utility pole storage yard blaze

By Jim Guy and Carmen George



Fresno Fire Department firefighters, nearly obscured by waves from the intense heat generated by the burning utility poles, put water down to keep the blaze from spreading, at a storage yard off of Highway 99, north of Ashlan Avenue, Thursday morning, April 30, 2015. JOHN WALKER — THE FRESNO BEE |[Buy Photo](#)

Firefighters who battled a large blaze that engulfed hundreds of power poles in a storage yard in northwest Fresno on Thursday were struggling to squelch searing flames — and were forced to lay 2,000 feet of hose because fire hydrants on the property weren't working.

Crews initially were pouring 2,000 to 3,000 gallons of water a minute on the fire, with damage estimates totaling up to \$3 million. By Thursday evening, water was reduced to 1,000 to 2,000 gallons a minute.

The fire started around 3:45 a.m. at the yard north of Ashlan Avenue and east of Golden State Boulevard.

McFarland Cascade, which provides poles for a number of businesses, including Pacific Gas & Electric Co., rents the two- to three-acre yard where the fire started, said Fresno Fire Department spokesman Pete Martinez. The name of the property owner was not provided Thursday, but Martinez said the owner was responsible for ensuring there was a working fire hydrant system.

Martinez said at 5 p.m. Thursday that it could be another 12 hours before the fire was extinguished.

“Smoke conditions are a lot better,” Martinez said Thursday evening. “We have made good progress extinguishing the fire. But there are still visible flames and really hot poles. ... It burned all the diesel off the exterior of the poles and now it’s just like having a big bonfire of logs.”

At the height of the fire, intense waves of heat could be felt by motorists on Golden State Boulevard. A massive plume of smoke snaked south across the Valley.

As the blaze continued to burn, McFarland Cascade workers used heavy equipment to remove undamaged poles before they also burst into flames.

Fire investigators are still working to determine how the fire started. Martinez said there could be several causes, including a spark from a power line or a passing train as well as arson. He said the investigators have found the area where the blaze started.

Because the fire hydrant system on the property was not working, Martinez said firefighters had to lay about 2,000 feet of hose from a working hydrant in the area of Brawley and Ashcroft avenues. The fire was so hot that water sprayed only kept the blaze from spreading at first, doing little to extinguish the burning poles.

Martinez said the damage from fire is estimated to be between \$1.5 million and \$3 million. There were around 20 to 25 burning piles, each containing 50 to 100 poles. At the fire’s peak, Martinez said, there were around 24 firefighters on scene.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District said a “health caution” was in place until the fire was extinguished. Smoke from the fire will affect air quality from Fresno County south to Kern County, the district said in a news release.

Along with the burning diesel, Martinez said the poles were coated in pentachlorophenol — a pesticide and wood preservative commonly used to treat wood poles.

The blaze generates fine particulates that can cause serious health problems, the air district said.

People with respiratory conditions, along with young children and elderly people, are especially susceptible to health effects from these pollutants, the air district said. It urged residents to follow their doctors’ orders when exposed to fire emissions.

As the fire sent flames perhaps a hundred feet into the air, bystanders briefly held their breath as a Union Pacific freight train approached the inferno raging just feet from the tracks. The freight, which was realigning cars in a nearby freight yard, briefly lurched to a stop in front of the blaze.

“Hey! Are those tank cars full of fuel?” one asked. The train then uneventfully backed up, returning to the yard.

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