

"Major chemical incident" at Veolia's site in Preston

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Veolia Environmental Services is to investigate "as soon as it is safe to do so" how 62,000 litres of flammable waste liquid caught fire at its Preston site.

The M6 was closed northbound and southbound between junctions 29 and 32 this morning (July 2, 2007) as firefighters battled the blaze at the Veolia Cleanaway facility in Red Scar Industrial, Ribblesdale, Preston.

Veolia employees spotted flames around 6am and called emergency services. The area was evacuated and no injuries have been reported.

"Major incident"

Lancashire Fire and Rescue Services confirmed the fire as a "major chemical incident at a chemical plant". It said that "62,000 litres of flammable waste liquid" was burning and that "attempts are being made to protect a large single storey building containing a vast number of cylinders".

Drums of chemicals were said to be exploding as the fire took hold and local newspaper The Lancashire Evening Post reported eyewitnesses who saw flames "leaping hundreds of feet in the air".

The newspaper also explained that drivers had been asked to close car windows and turn off fans because of a huge chemical cloud floating above the burning site.

Under control

The fire was brought under control around 10am and the company said in a statement that "a full investigation will take place as soon as it is safe to do so".

Veolia is understood to be working with the Environment Agency who will help determine which chemicals were involved in the incident, as there were a number on the two sites.

Veolia's facility, on the industrial estate shared with other waste management companies, is regulated by the HSE's hazardous installation directorate and has been subject to improvement notices in the past.

Further Update from 3/2/2007

£4m bill for chemical chaos



The dramatic scene at the Veolia Environmental Services site in the aftermath of the explosion (picture: Lancashire Fire Service)

Preston is counting the £4m cost of the huge chemical explosion which brought the city to a standstill on Monday.

Businesses on the Red Scar Industrial Estate are counting the cost of more than 100,000 lost man hours with workers trapped on gridlocked roads after the blast shut the M6.

Tens of thousands of people were stranded for more than three hours as police sealed off the area around the Veolia Environmental Services, on Longridge Road, Ribblesdale.

Hundreds of drums containing flammable waste liquid went up in smoke. Investigators probing the blaze for the fire service have reviewed CCTV of the incident which shows how the fire started in a single barrel before spreading to the rest of the compound.

Dave Russell, station manager at Lancashire Fire and Rescue headquarters, said: "It could have been some sort of chemical reaction."

Economic experts estimate the cost in lost man hours equated to £2.75m with insurance claims for lost business expected to account for a further £1m. The road chaos also meant 20 schools were closed.

One manufacturing firm on Red Scar is planning to put in an insurance claim for £50,000 for lost business after deliveries they were expecting to receive failed to arrive.

Deputy chief executive Hugh Evans, of the North and Western Lancashire Chamber

of Commerce, said: "Road congestion does not just cost more directly in terms of fuel and wage bills; it has a profound effect on forward planning."

At least 10 Preston police officers from the nightshift were kept on for three hours to deal with the problems and a further six from the motorway unit, costing an estimated £5,000 in overtime. Around 35 of the 70 fire-fighters at the scene were also kept on for around four hours from their nightshift, costing thousands more.

There are 80 companies on the Red Scar estate alone, which were deserted for most of the day.

Police and firefighters began letting limited traffic back on to the site at 2.30pm before opening the gates fully at around 3.15pm.

Deliveries from supermarket chain Booths' depot on Longridge Road, overlooking the site of the fire, to its network of stores across the North West were delayed by "a couple of hours" during the fire.

Investigators from the Health and Safety Executive and the Environment Agency are due to start a probe. An Environment Agency spokesman said it does not believe any chemicals leaked into nearby streams and rivers.

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<http://www.lep.co.uk/ViewArticle.aspx?sectionid=73&articleid=2999060>

History repeats itself at Red Scar

More than 60 people – including two pregnant women – needed hospital treatment after a chemical explosion on the same site in August 1995. In that incident a cloud of gas covered a housing estate and residents struggled to breathe, suffering streaming eyes and sore throats.

Homes on the Grange estate had to be evacuated and the M6 was closed.

All casualties were stripped and had to shower in an effort to decontaminate them.

It emerged after the incident that a substance similar to tear gas was released and drifted over the town when a drum of chemicals exploded at Cleanaway on the Red Scar Industrial Estate.

Cleanaway, which was bought out by

Veolia Environmental Services in November 2006, specialises in the disposal of difficult or technical wastes, including many solvent-type substances.

Bosses admitted that the chemical in question, bromo diethyl carbonate, acts like tear gas.

In December 1995, following a four month probe, County Hall bosses told Cleanaway that they would have to seek clearance for permission to deal with substances liable to induce weeping on exposure, and materials likely to decompose in containers causing chemical reactions.

In May 2000 a major industrial fire at the Red Scar Industrial Estate triggered another large-scale emergency.

Blazing cars, tyres and batteries sent up a black cloud which travelled more than three miles towards the town centre where a murky mist appeared.

More than 30 firefighters were called to the Preston Recycling site where a large stack of scrap metal was well alight.

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