

Two Separate But Related Fires At Greene Brothers Furniture Battled

Firefighters were at Greene Brothers Furniture Co. on White Pine Street in North Wilkesboro late Monday night and most of Tuesday morning for two separate but related fires.

The first fire was in the Greene Brothers boiler room building, where heat for the furniture factory is produced. The second fire was in a nearby silo that stores sawdust, which fuels the boiler. The sawdust is produced when furniture is made.

Keith Johnston, Greene Brothers president, said the furniture manufacturing operation was closed Tuesday but work resumed Wednesday. The silo was emptied Wednesday to make sure no smoldering sawdust remained and for restarting the factory's dust removal system.

"We will need to replace our current heating system and we are still exploring those options," said Johnston. "On a bright note, this happened when no employees were present and it didn't affect the integrity of our manufacturing facility."

Greene Brothers has 36 employees.

The Wilkes Communications Center dispatched the North Wilkesboro Fire Department at about 10:30 p.m. Monday in response to a fire in the boiler room building, which is about 30 feet from the manufacturing plant. The Knotville Fire Department was dispatched to assist.

North Wilkesboro Fire Chief Niki Hamby said the fire in the boiler room building possibly started from sawdust and could have included a small sawdust explosion. The wooden frame of a tin roof on the block boiler room building burned and electrical wiring was damaged.

After the fire in the boiler room building appeared to be out, he said, firefighters checked for remnants with thermal imaging equipment to determine if additional efforts were needed and didn't find anything.

About 25 to 30 firefighters responded to the first fire. The last of about 25 to 30 firefighters who responded to the first call cleared the scene about 1:35 a.m. Tuesday.

At about 6:50 a.m. Tuesday, North Wilkesboro firefighters were dispatched back to Greene Brothers in response to a fire in a silo that collects sawdust from the furniture manufacturing operation. Firefighters from the Knotville and Mulberry-Fairplains departments were dispatched to assist a few minutes later.

"Evidently, some embers got into the auger system that leads to the silo," said Hamby, explaining that this caused a smoldering sawdust fire in the silo.

He said the second fire was more challenging because it involved removing metal plates from the side of the silo and then loosening and removing a large amount of sawdust that wasn't on fire to reach the pocket of smoldering sawdust.

Hamby said this approach had less risk of exposing the smoldering fire to too much air and causing an explosion.

“The sawdust was caked up and I had to take an axe to it” to loosen the material, said Hamby. “We took turns chipping at it and pulling it out” so water from a fire hose could be sprayed on smoldering sawdust.

He said a Bobcat loader belonging to the Town of North Wilkesboro was used to move sawdust pulled from the silo out of the way. “It was probably 10 to 12 dump truck loads of sawdust.”

About 20 to 25 firefighters responded to the second fire and firefighters were there until about 11:50 a.m. Tuesday. Hamby said a North Wilkesboro firefighter sprained his ankle when he stepped in a ditch.