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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH ★★★★★

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Hundreds Evacuated In E. St. Louis After Monsanto Spill

By Daniel R. Browning
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

A chemical spill Sunday at the Monsanto plant in Sauget forced the evacuation of hundreds of families from the south side of East St. Louis and caused about 200 people to seek medical attention, authorities said.

At 12:15 p.m., a railroad tanker loaded with phosphorous trichloride was overfilled and 250 to 300 gallons of the chemical spilled onto the ground, said Glynn Young, a spokesman for Monsanto.

Security personnel for the plant sounded an alarm and emergency crews were called to manage the cleanup, Young said.

Strong wind carried a chemical vapor from the spill toward East St. Louis. Company officials consulted with the East St. Louis Fire Department, and the department agreed to immediately evacuate the south end of East St. Louis, Young said.

Fire Chief Bruce Hill said an area of five square blocks had been evacuated; the area is bounded by Wilford, Piggott, 14th and 19th streets.

An East St. Louis police officer who was on the scene said the area is densely populated. He said 700 to 1,000 families lived in the area. Many of the residents are elderly.

Hill said, "A lot of people had refused to leave, because they had been through it before and they decided to tough it out."

People suffering from eye, throat and respiratory problems were sent to St. Mary's Hospital in East St. Louis to be checked. A police officer was among the 150 to 200 who sought treatment, said Karla Scott, a spokeswoman at the hospital. No one had been admitted as of 4 p.m. Battalion Chief Raymond Mix of the East St. Louis Fire Department said seven of his firefighters had sought treatment and were released.

Phosphorous trichloride is used as a "building block" to produce agricultural and water-treatment chemicals, Young said. The chemical is a volatile material that vaporizes when mixed with the moisture in the air, forming a gaseous fog, he said.

The chemical will irritate the eyes and respiratory tract, Young said. But

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Spill

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plant officials said the amount of the chemical that spilled would cause no chronic health problems.

Federal and state environmental protection agencies were notified of the spill, Young said. The Illinois agency was at the plant investigating Sunday afternoon.

Emergency crews immediately began to flood the spill with water, which washed the chemical into a collection pan around the railroad tracks, Young said. The flooding lasted until about 3 p.m., when crews began picking up the spilled material.

No Monsanto employees were reported injured. Young said the cause of the overflow was unknown. Investigators were working Sunday afternoon to find out what had happened.

The emergency room at St. Mary's was swamped with people who had been exposed to the chemical.

Among them was Mattie Wren, 60, who said she first noticed the effects of the chemical when she drove home from church. She said she had found it difficult to breathe.

Wren went immediately to the hospital complaining of a cough, burning eyes and stomach problems but left because many people were seeking treatment. Wren, who has asthma and heart problems, returned at 3:40 p.m. to find the emergency room to be still busy.

Larry Grice, 29, said he had become ill while driving through the area and had to pull off the road. "I just threw up," he said. "It hit me in the stomach."

Herbert Mims, 60, said he was away from the area when the evacuation took place but rushed to a church at 19th Street and Tudor Avenue to pick up his wife, Pearlie Mae Mims, 51. She had called him to complain of burning eyes, he said.

When he finally got to her, "she had water running out of her eyes," he said. Herbert Mims said he had rushed his wife to the hospital about 12:30 p.m. At 4 p.m., he was still waiting outside for word of her condition.

Jessie Abbott rushed into the area to evacuate her 103-year-old father, Ishman Quillar. He doesn't hear well, Abbott said.

"He hasn't complained yet," she said, "but the chemicals were in the house, and he got it."

Abbott added, "Every year something happens down at that plant."

Young said he did not know how many spills had happened at the plant in the last five years. But he added, "The plant is making an extraordinary effort to control spills."

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Trash Fire Causes Blaze That Destroys Warehouse

By Robert Kelly
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

A warehouse that held the dreams of a family-owned business went up in thick, black smoke Sunday afternoon in East St. Louis.

The fire also destroyed a small adjoining building of brick that had been vacant for some time.

No one suffered serious injuries in the blaze. A few firefighters were treated for minor cuts and smoke inhalation.

Firefighters from East St. Louis and several assisting departments needed three hours to bring the fire under control. The thick, black smoke originated with burning tires and could be seen for miles.

East St. Louis Fire Chief Bruce Hill said the fire began shortly after 1 p.m. in a pile of trash on a vacant lot just south of the warehouse. Hill said strong southerly wind blew embers from the trash onto the warehouse. He said firefighters did not know what started the trash fire.

The warehouse, at 210 South 15th Street, is a two-story brick structure that covered half a block. The warehouse once belonged to Ben Shanfield & Co., a dealer in truck parts. The neighborhood has many vacant lots and warehouses.

The destroyed warehouse belongs to Maurice Washington and four siblings, who had bought it about a year ago and had planned to open a trucking business at the site. They had no insurance, Washington said.

Washington was at the scene of the fire to lament the loss. "We had every dime we had tied up in it," he said. "We've lost it all."

At its height, the blaze had threatened to spread to a third warehouse, about 50 yards to the north, Hill said. He credited firefighters from the city of St. Louis, as well the Madison and Midway fire departments in Illinois.

St. Louis and East St. Louis have no formal mutual aid agreement, Hill said. Their cooperation Sunday "was just respect from two fire departments, each trying to do their job."

Washington complained that East St. Louis firefighters had been slow to arrive at the warehouse fire. Hill responded that his firefighters had been busy evacuating residents in the south end of town because of a chemical leak at Monsanto's Sauget plant.

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ST. LOUIS/TUESDAY

State To Investigate E. St. Louis' Response To Spill

By Safir Ahmed
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

The Illinois attorney general's office said Monday that it would begin an investigation into why East St. Louis officials did not implement an evacuation plan after a chemical spill Sunday at the Monsanto plant in Sauget.

The plan, adopted in 1985 after several chemical spills, calls for using Bi-State buses to take people to various shelters in the city. Instead, residents in the Rush City area on the city's south side were simply told to leave home on their own.

"We were just notifying people," said Bruce Hill, East St. Louis' fire chief. "We told people to move north on Bond Avenue."

The decision to implement the evacuation plan rests with the city's fire department. But Hill said the plan had not been invoked because the emergency "didn't last that long."

The spill occurred about 12:15 p.m. Sunday. By late afternoon, about 450 people were treated at area hospitals for eye, nose and throat irritations. The number of people seeking medical treatment subsided by early evening.

Joe Madonia, assistant attorney general, said that his office would immediately investigate the failure to implement the evacuation plan.

"I think it's a case where everything looked OK on paper," Madonia said. "But somewhere — we don't yet know where — it did not work."

Monsanto officials said Monday that the spill was the result of human error. The spill occurred when a railroad tanker was overfilled with phosphorous trichloride and 250 to 300 gallons of the chemical spilled onto the ground.

"Our normal procedures for loading a tank car require the presence of an operator at specific points of loading," Boyle said. "Our preliminary determination is that an operator was not present at the normal completion of the loading of the tank car."

Boyle said an internal investigation was continuing and might result in disciplinary action.

Several residents of the Rush City area said Monday that they had heard a siren when the chemical spill occurred but had not known what to make of it.

"I heard the siren and I thought maybe it was a tornado or something," said Lawrence Wilson, of 902 Trendly Avenue. "Even if I knew it was a spill, where am I going to go?"

Wilson said that he had simply ignored the siren. He said he had felt some burning in his eyes and nose but had not felt the need to seek medical attention.

The siren was installed by Monsanto and two other chemical companies after residents protested the lack of notification when emergencies occurred at the plants.

The Rev. Buck Jones, a longtime critic of chemical companies in the area, said that he was "extremely upset" by the manner in which the evacuation was handled.

Jones is director of Project H.O.P.E., an East St. Louis organization that provides services to poor people.

"I feel like we have been deceived and misled," Jones said. "What this tells us is that there is no evacuation plan. We want the attorney general to force the chemical companies to have evacuation plans in place."

Jones said that when people were notified, they had not known what to do or where to go.

"There was mass confusion," Jones said. "Some people were notified after the fact. Thank God it wasn't anything more serious."

Boyle, the plant's manager, said that evacuation plans were the responsibility of local fire departments. The company's responsibility is to notify local authorities when an emergency occurs, and that was done immediately on Sunday, he said.

Phosphorous trichloride is used as a "building block" to produce agricultural and water-treatment chemicals. The chemical is a volatile material that vaporizes when mixed with moisture in the air, forming a gaseous fog.

The chemical can irritate the eyes and respiratory tract. Boyle said the chemical's effects were short-term.

Tom Powell, an emergency response specialist with the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, said that based on the information he had about the spill, evacuation plans should have been implemented. Local fire departments had the responsibility to call for an evacuation, he said.

Pearlie Mims, a resident, was attending a service at the New Bethlehem Baptist Church, 1906 Tudor Avenue, when the spill occurred. Mims said that she had gone to St. Mary's Hospital in East St. Louis and had been forced to wait for nearly three hours before being treated.

"My eyes still burn today, and I keep getting a headache," she said.

Madonia, the assistant attorney general, said that the environmental control division would begin an investigation immediately to find out why the city failed to evacuate people according to the plan.

Madonia also said that a suit failed by his office last year against Monsanto had been settled earlier this year. The suit had arisen out of an incident in March 1986, when some acid escaped and 16 residents were treated at hospitals.

Madonia said the company stopped production of the acids in September after a second accident and settled the suit. Monsanto paid the state $14,000 in fines to settle the suit, he said.