Largest Rice Mill Destroyed By Fire

LAKE CHARLES, La. (AP) - Firefighters were playing the night playing water on the rubble of what once was the world's largest rice mill, making sure that one of the area's worst fires didn't flare up again.

Fire Chief Algie Breaux said the fire, which forced evacuation of about 200 people Wednesday from the area around the 60-year-old building near downtown Lake Charles, was the worst he's fought in his 27 years on the job.

"If the rice dust inside ignites it could level the entire surrounding block," he said shortly after the blaze erupted at 1 p.m. Wednesday.

The blaze also threatened nearby paint storage tanks.

Breaux said it was so hot that firefighters couldn't use metal nozzles on their hoses and had to set up water guns to hit the burning rice dryer and connecting building with heavy streams of water.

About 3,500 gallons a minute poured onto the flames, said District Chief A.J. Blanchette.

People were allowed back home about 5:30 p.m., about 4 1/2 hours after the fire broke out.

After three hours, fire fighters conceded they could do nothing to save the sprawling old wooden facility and concentrated on containing the flames. The nine-story building was considered a total loss.

As they called for evacuations, fire fighters said there was danger of explosion from the large amounts of rice dust.

In addition, several hundred barrels of paints were stored a couple hundred yards away at the Carboline plant and officials feared they too would explode.

As the fire raged, all streets around the mill were blockaded. People in the frame houses nearby were advised to leave.

The evacuation order was thought to cover as many as 400 families, but when the fire broke out at noon many were away at work. Officials estimated in late afternoon that about 100 families actually left their homes.

There were no reports of injuries.

Bud Viator, one of the owners, said the blaze apparently started in a 440-volt electrical junction box.

Viator quoted a workmen as saying he saw the box burst into flames, but no one knew why. Viator speculated the wires could have been gnawed by rats.

The rice facility, located on 40 acres on the Calcasieu River about a mile from downtown, has been used since 1965 for drying, storing and bagging rice, but was built in 1924 as a rice mill. The huge facility was widely recognized as the biggest facility of its kind in the world.

The facility was owned by the HNV Central River Inc., operated by a group of local businessmen who took over the facility after the rice milling stopped.

The building is on the site first used for rice milling in 1892. This building was constructed after a fire in 1924.

It was the second major rice dryer fire in southwest Louisiana in a week.

Last Wednesday, fire destroyed an abandoned dryer on the south side of Eunice. That building, which had been partially torn down, burned after a trash fire spread to the building and rapidly got out of control.

No one was injured in the Eunice fire.