Gopher Girl
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Industrial Fire at Chemical Plant

Web Editor: Sean Rowe
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LATEST UPDATES:

- Residents north of I-20 are advised to evacuate, the Rockdale County Fire Department has announced.

- Rockdale County Hospital has reached capacity for treating people affected by the fire and the emitted fumes. Others are advised to go to Newton County General Hospital, located at 5126 Hospital Drive in Covington.

- Fire has spread to businesses near Bio-Labs, Inc.

Stinging fumes from a blazing fire at Bio-Lab, Inc. in Rockdale County has shut down I-20 and forced a mile-wide evacuation.

Flames erupted about 4 a.m. Tuesday at the business, located along Rockdale Industrial Way, and have sent huge plumes of black smoke streaming into neighboring areas and highways. As Rockdale authorities operate from a three- to five-mile perimeter around the fire, people are being urged to evacuate nearby homes and businesses.

Two evacuation centers have been set up at J.H. House Elementary School and Heritage School. Rockdale police are also advising people who need help in evacuating to call Conyers police at 770-483-6600 or the Rockdale County Sheriff's Office at 770-483-4200.

Monty Echols, vice president of Bio-Lab Inc. spoke to reporters about 9 a.m., saying, "There were no employees injured in this incident. That's most important to us."

"In the early morning hours this morning, approximately 4 [a.m.], we noticed some smoke coming from one of our distribution buildings. We have three facilities in the general area right there, and one of the facilities had smoke coming from it," Echols said.

"Immediately we responded to that with our own emergency response team, as well as calling the fire department. Since that time we have been working diligently to get that situation as under hand as much as possible," he said.

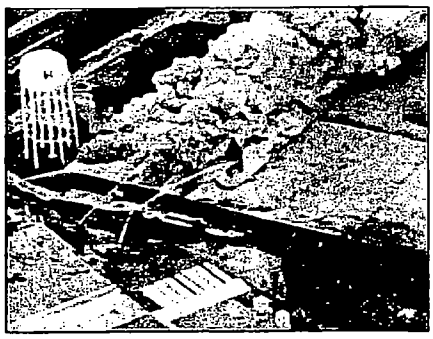
Sandra Black, who works for an answering service near the fire, told 11Alive, "For the first time in 30 years, we've had to not answer phones. Our operators have had to evacuate because the smoke was coming right over our building. It actually surrounded the whole building, it was black outside and they were not able to breathe well and they were getting headaches."

"They had to leave," Black said, "We're within a mile, we're very close. We're at West Avenue and railroad tracks."

11Alive's Elaine Reyes says she spoke to some residents who chose to remain at their homes despite the advised evacuation. Authorities urged everyone to close all windows wherever they are and turn off any air-conditioning systems.

[Watch Elaine Reyes' Report]

Ground View of Fire, Smoke



Related Links

- Gallery: Scenes from the Fire
- Video: Aerial View of the Fire
- Official Statement: Bio-Lab Inc.

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Rockdale County firefighters are leading the effort against the blaze, while turning to neighboring counties and cities for assistance. Firefighters are wary of keeping the fire from spreading to any nearby structures in the warehouse district.

Firefighters are maintaining a defensive stance while allowing the fire to burn itself out.

About 7:25 a.m., 11Alive's Paul Crawley reported that a news chopper had taken the Rockdale sheriff and fire chief up for an aerial view of the fire, smoke and subsequent damage. Crawley said he had not heard any official reports of any fire-related injuries.
[Watch Paul Crawley's Report]

The Bio-Labs facility had suffered at least a partial collapse with reports of other on-site chemicals having ignited.

Meanwhile, I-20 remained shutdown in both directions at Salem Road, on the east side of the fire, according to 11Alive Traffic Reporter Jim Basile. I-20 was reportedly shut down well back into DeKalb County to the Klondike Overpass, just west of Highway 124, between Evans Mill and Turner Hill Road.
[Watch Jim Basile's Traffic Report]

Both DeKalb County authorities and the Georgia Department of Transportation confirm that I-20 would be closed off from just west of Turner Hill Road to Salem Road, the exit just beyond 138. Many smaller roads to the north of the fire have been shut down for some time since the fire broke out.

Basile advised going southbound to pick up Highway 212 – Browns Mill Road – and taking that over to Klondike. From there, it's possible to work over to Evans Mills Road, and from there taking I-20 from that point heading into the downtown Atlanta area.

11Alive Forecaster Flip Spiceland says even though the visible, streaming cloud of smoke billowing from the burning Bio-Lab, it is not showing up on Doppler Radar. The smoke is still shifting and blowing toward the east, with winds blowing from the southwest for much of the morning. Spiceland says that could bring the smoke closer and eventually into Conyers.
[Watch Flip Spiceland's Weather Report]

Spiceland says as the smoke rises higher it is being flattened out due in part to the low plume that is skimming across the surface of the atmospheric ceiling.

Should the fire continue later into the day, Spiceland says the daytime temperatures plus the surging heat could pose a distinct danger to firefighters and other emergency workers. Daytime temperatures are expected to reach into the As the fire heats up, the smoke could rise higher into the upper 80's and lower 90's.

There's still no official word on what started the fire.

Echols said, "It is a random-storage warehouse, so it's not exactly known what particular thing is burning at this particular time. The cause of the fire, once again, is unknown and it will be some time before, if ever, before we can figure out what that situation is."

Bio-Lab is a subsidiary of Great Lakes Chemical, which produces water treatment products and equipment. Bio-Lab also has centers located in Decatur and Lawrenceville, Ga.

More details as they become available.

11Alive Reporters Elaine Reyes, Paul Crawley, Flip Spiceland and Jim Basile contributed to this report.

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