

THE STAR-HERALD

Morning blaze destroys Ashland pellet mill

By Kathy McCarty
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ASHLAND — A local pellet mill was destroyed by fire Tuesday morning, putting about a dozen employees out of work in a community whose livelihood depends heavily on manufacturing jobs.



FIRE DESTROYS MILL — Firefighters from Ashland, Masardis, Portage Lake and Mapleton responded to a fire at Northeast Pellets LLC, located on the Reality Rd., at approximately 12:30 a.m. Tuesday, with crews remaining at the scene for nearly 12 hours. Here, Ashland Fire Chief Ned LaBelle, pictured at left, looks on as firefighters look for hot spots and hose down a section of the structure, while heavy equipment operator Mark Rafford moves debris to allow crews better access.

The fire was reported around 12:30 a.m. March 31 at Northeast Pellets LLC, located at 53 Reality Road, according to Ashland Fire Chief Ned LaBelle.

Reality was more than an address when firefighters arrived at the industrial park to find the mill ablaze.

“Three workers were at the mill when the fire was reported. We’re not sure of the exact cause at this point,” said LaBelle, taking a moment from overseeing fire crews at the scene to answer questions.

LaBelle said crews from four departments were at the business the better part of the night, fighting the blaze.

“We had mutual aid from Masardis, Mapleton and Portage Lake. We had at least 50 firefighters on location,” he said.

Ashland Ambulance Service and the U.S. Border Patrol also assisted.

Fire hose stretched out for almost a mile from the nearest water source, near the entrance gate to a neighboring business, Boralex.

“We had about 5,000 feet of hose strung out to get to the site. The road’s a bit soupy getting in, but at least the temperatures weren’t extreme overnight,” said LaBelle. “At least our lines didn’t freeze up.”

LaBelle said inside the structure, the blaze drove the temperature up high enough to destroy metal. Metal siding laid charred and twisted on smoldering piles of sawdust. What looked like a square of melted metal was what remained of a fireproof file cabinet. Crews hosed down wood debris as heavy equipment, operated by Mark Rafford, moved blackened hunks of metal and crumpled machinery to allow firefighters better access to problem areas.

Portage Lake Fire Chief David Bolstridge was also on hand and noted it was a learning experience for crews.

“While it provides good training, this is definitely not our preferred method of doing so. I wish we were working together under different circumstances,” said Bolstridge. “Our departments work well together. Incidents like this prove that.”

Bolstridge said it’s been a busy few days.

“My department handled a fire over the weekend at a Portage Lake camp. We had mutual aid from these same crews,” said Bolstridge. “I’m hoping things quiet down.”

LaBelle said while the Northeast Pellets facility is a total loss, circumstances could have turned out far worse.

“The wind was blowing in the right direction to prevent Boralex (sawdust piles) from catching fire. That would have been a disaster on an even larger scale,” said LaBelle.

LaBelle said the type of product the mill produced made fighting the fire more difficult.

“We had four or five explosions in the night. Sawdust is highly combustible; there were various tanks that exploded. Wood pellets proved they’re good sources of heat too,” he said.

No injuries were reported as the result of the blaze, according to LaBelle.

Matt Bell, CEO of the company, spent much of Tuesday morning meeting with Town Manager Jim Gardner, discussing where to go from here.

“This is terrible. I know Matt both as a businessman and as a family friend. I met with him this morning. We talked about what to do next,” said Gardner, in a phone interview Tuesday morning.

Gardner said he’ll be looking into what can be done to help the displaced workers.

“The fire left 12 people without work. We’re looking at what can be done for them,” said Gardner.

This latest news comes at a very difficult time for the community. In February, Northeast Pellets announced it would be laying off approximately nine of its crew, due to the slumping economy and difficulty getting wood product, following the closure of Fraser mills in Ashland and Masardis.

“The fire burned the business flat to the ground. No one was hurt; that was a good thing. And the business was insured,” said Gardner.

For tax purposes, the real estate is valued at \$192,200, while the personal property (contents) is valued at \$231,000.

Gardner said the loss of product and equipment make it unlikely a temporary site could be found to continue production.

“There’s just too much involved — lost equipment, adequate space,” he said.

Gardner said the reality of the matter began to set in as he talked with Bell.

“This is a difficult reality to wake up to. Matt and I talked about what happens next — rebuilding or what else happens. We’re in the exploration stage wondering where we go from here,” said Gardner.