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May 5, 1948

E. R. Jette

CNR Division Safety Department

Contaminated Dump Fire, May 3, 1948

The contaminated dump, located on the DP Site road, was the scene of a fire which burned stubbornly for two hours, May 3, 1948. An investigation, by this department, has disclosed the following facts:

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1. At approximately 10:20 AM, May 3, 1948, an anonymous person telephoned the Fire Department that "a small fire is burning in the contaminated dump". Two pieces of fire apparatus and a full complement of men responded to the alarm and upon arrival at the dump found sixty per cent of the open portion of the dump ablaze and flames shooting approximately fifty feet into the air.

The firemen had little trouble in subduing the blaze, but persistent efforts to put it out were of little avail because of the loaded condition of the dump area in which the blaze was confined. Dense, low-hanging smoke prevailed in large volume.

2. At approximately 10:35 AM, James Tribby was notified of the fire, in the absence of other Health Group personnel, and with representatives of the Safety Department went immediately to the scene of the blaze and took charge with Herbert Drager. Because of the dense smoke which scattered throughout the area, due to the condition of shifting winds, all areas east and west of the dump, from the food warehouses to the DP Laundry, were evacuated of personnel. Respiratory protection was provided for all persons at the scene, and it was necessary to close the DP road to traffic.
3. By 12:15 PM, the fire had been extinguished except for two very small, isolated points and there was no longer any hazard from smoke. The end of the emergency was declared, and all persons who had been exposed to the smoke in the area were monitored and given nose counts. Fire Department personnel were dismissed at 1:15 PM, but a stand-by crew of two men and one piece of apparatus were left until 5:30 PM to watch for rekindling of the fire.
4. Investigation has failed to disclose any obvious cause for the blaze, and it is presumed that it started by spontaneous combustion. The area in which the blaze occurred had not had any trash dumped into it for about three days, and much of the trash in the fire area had been in the dump for three weeks. The trash included large quantities of wood from temporary storage cabinets used by the Quantity Control Department, several "live" storage batteries, large quantities of miscellaneous scrap metals, discarded contaminated clothing and boxed



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laboratory waste. The conditions were ideally suited for spontaneous combustion.

5. During the fire, there was some evidence that chemicals had been disposed of in the dump in an unauthorized manner in cardboard containers used for the regular disposal of common laboratory waste. Several cartons of waste gave off minor explosions, and upon one occasion a cloud of pink smoke arose from the debris in the dump. Whether this was due to the heat of the fire, the action of the water or chemical reaction is not known. The condition certainly did not help in keeping the fire under control.

This most recent dump fire should serve as an object lesson in many respects. It should point to the hazards of having the dump located in areas near or in line with living and working areas where toxic smokes and vapors can create an emergency condition. Even though we are presently short of dump space, it is poor policy to leave the dump uncovered for extended periods of time. If it is not practical to cover the trash with a light layer of dirt as a temporary measure before covering over any portion completely, it is suggested that the dump be wet down with large quantities of water at least twice a week until such a time as more adequate precautions can be taken.

Herbert W. Drager

HWD:dns

cc: Laboratory Safety Office
Bolton
Tribby ✓
Stout
File