

Fears Bomaderry plant fire could explode, exclusion zone in place

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FULL TEXT

Fears of a dust explosion at Manildra's plant in Bomaderry have forced the site's closure as firefighters battle a smouldering fire.

A 500 metre exclusion zone is in place and parts of Bolong Road are closed, with nearby businesses in that area unable to operate.

The fire ignited about 9.30am on Monday, May 27, inside a silo containing 600 tonnes of mix used for stock feed.

"Once we started to move the product out we discovered the product wasn't entirely pelletised, it was mixed with some powdered stuff, which potentially can create a dust explosion," Fire and Rescue NSW Inspector Rick Jones said.

"We halted operations and formulated a plan to minimise the risk of that, which involves pumping CO2 into the top of the cylinder, to reduce any issue of that, and once we've got that in place, to stabilise the silo, then we can start the process of removing the product."

FRNSW Acting Superintendent Guy Lightfoot said if an explosion occurs the large silo could collapse.

While a minor staff evacuation of 15 people occurred when the fire first started, the entire Shoalhaven Starches site was evacuated about 6pm on Monday after the powder mix was found.

No Manildra Group employees were injured during the incident.

"Manildra Group's onsite team is working with FRNSW to remove the smouldering product from the isolated silo," a company spokesperson said.

"Emergency protocols and safety measures have been enacted while this removal is taking place."

Firefighters remained at the site overnight, and on Tuesday they are working with Manildra staff, HAZMAT crews and aviation experts as the emergency continues.

At 7.45am on Tuesday more than 20 firefighters were still at the scene, with operations expected to "ramp up" during the day, Act Sup Lightfoot said.

"It'll probably at least another six or eight hours," he said. "It was always going to be a protracted incident."

A drone and thermal imaging camera are being used to monitor temperatures within the silo and HAZMAT crews are on site. The cause of the fire is yet to be determined.

The fire is the latest in a string of safety concerns at the plant, including four explosions at the Shoalhaven Starches plant since July 2023, the most recent on April 7.

Many of those shook homes in nearby surrounding streets, and were heard several kilometres away.

All four explosions were in a gluten dryer eight, and are being investigated by SafeWork NSW.

FRNSW Duty Commander Inspector Richard Jones praised the response by site staff and firefighters as an "example of a best-case-scenario".

"While business operations have been impacted, the actions of the facilities staff and firefighters has prevented the fire spreading and causing any further damage," he said.

CAPTION: Firefighters at Manildra Group's Bomaderry factory after a smouldering fire ignited in a silo on Monday, May 27, 2024. Picture by FRNSW

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