

Response stacks up

When firefighters turned out to a HAZMAT fire in North Fremantle they were greeted by a leaning tower of sea containers engulfed in flames.

The fire at Rous Head Marina in April saw firefighters act quickly to protect crews and keep the community safe while the full impact was determined.

Incident Controller Stuart Wade said that although he had responded to sea container fires in the past, this operation was different.

“Multiple refrigerated sea containers within the compound were fully involved in fire, with five in one tower and another 15 surrounding that,” he said.

“They had started to lean when we arrived and there was a chance that the stack would topple over, further complicating the operation.”

The first arriving crews identified the threat and established safety zones to ensure no personnel would be at risk if the containers fell.

There were limited evacuations because the fire was in a storage yard, and approximately 30 people on the wharf nearby were safely escorted from the area by firefighters and police.

Stuart said at the height of the fire, flames were 15 to 20 metres high, and smoke was visible from many kilometres away.

“The incident management team was concerned about the potential danger posed by fumes and as we needed to warn the community, public information was issued,” he said.

“We were initially unsure of the container contents because we could not gain access to them, but it was eventually determined they were empty and the smoke was the result of burning wall insulation.

“Luckily there was no sea breeze, as the smoke could have travelled and possibly impacted residents in North Fremantle.

“Instead, the winds were blowing in a south easterly direction, which meant the smoke was carried out to sea.”

While more than 35 Fire and Rescue Service firefighters worked to control the fire, the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) Pollution Response Unit was alerted to the incident.

On arrival they conducted air monitoring and analysis, and found the area to be safe.

After four hours spent battling the blaze, the fire was declared under control.

Stuart said the incident was a collaborative effort and praised the work of all involved, including career Fire and Rescue Service firefighters and volunteers from Bush Fire Brigades and the State Emergency Service.

“Crews got in there and cooled the containers sufficiently before dismantling them the next morning,” he said.

“They put a lot of effort in to ensure the stack did not collapse, and also prevented the fire from spreading to the main shed of the complex.”

In total an estimated 11 sea containers were lost and several more damaged.

“The BFB volunteers provided an emergency water supply in a bulk water tanker, while the SES provided lighting which proved invaluable as the incident progressed through the night and into the morning.

“We also worked very closely with the DEC Pollution Response Unit to monitor the surrounding area for contamination, and the Department of Transport to contain and avoid any run off into the harbour.”

The cause of the fire was classified as undetermined.



Photos courtesy of Matt Hayes.