

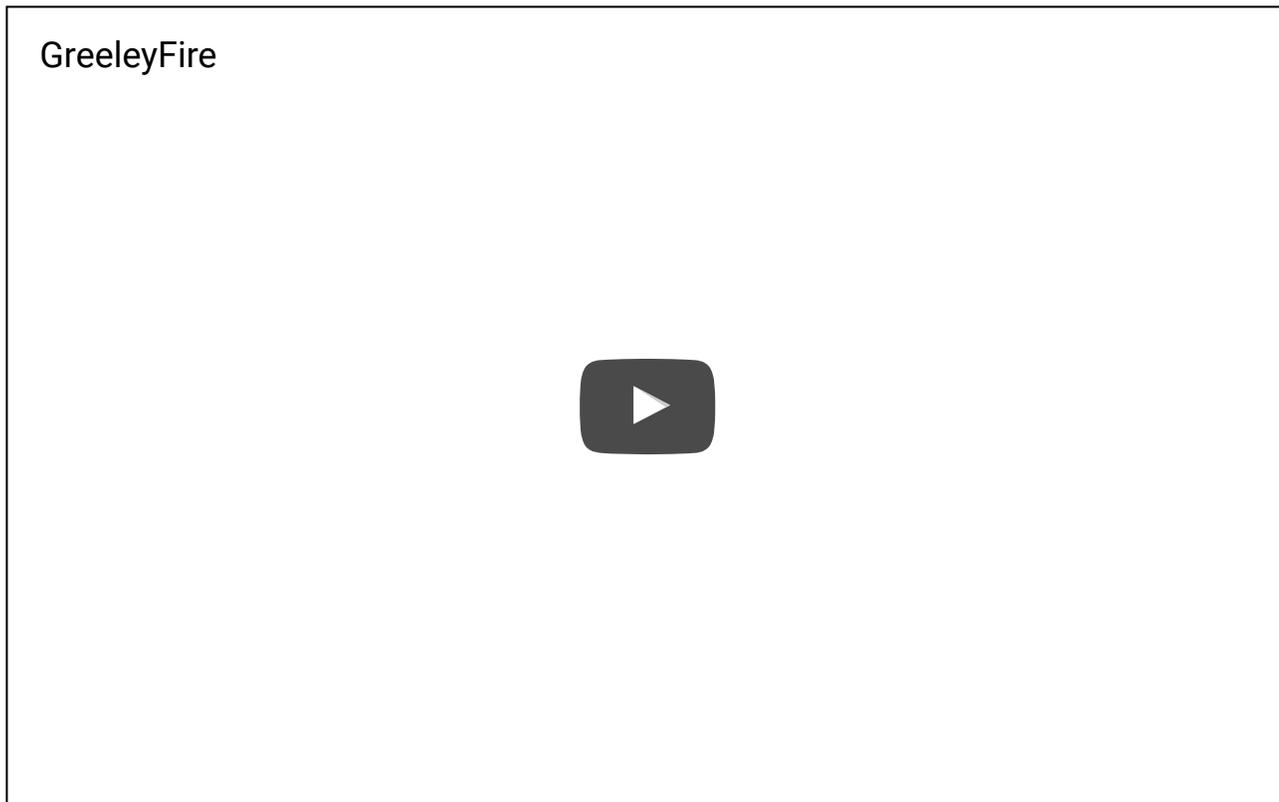


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Greeley firefighters extinguish blaze near Greeley-Weld County Airport (video)



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Cursed site?

The site of the fire was near an injection well that was linked to earthquakes outside of Greeley in May and June last year. On May 31, a 3.4 magnitude quake struck the area. On June 23, a 2.6 magnitude quake struck the same area. Researchers from the University of Colorado placed seismic monitors in the general area of several injection wells to better pinpoint the potential source of the quakes. They narrowed it to an injection well east of the Greeley-Weld County Airport.

The fire at a wastewater injection well site just northeast of the Greeley-Weld County Airport on Friday could mean a total loss at the facility, Greeley Fire Marshal Dale Lyman said.

About 1:15 p.m., a lightning bolt struck a water storage tank at the C4 facility east of the airport, causing a series of explosions and a fire that went on into the evening. After keeping the fire contained much of the day, firefighters began attack operations to extinguish the blaze about 5:30 p.m. Lyman said they had much of it knocked down about half an hour later. By 6:45 p.m. the fire was out.

“It was still kind of a smoldering hulk,” he said.

There were no reports of injuries.

Although quickly contained, explosions and fireballs erupted from the fire throughout the afternoon, spewing black smoke into the sky, which was visible for miles. The roar of the fire sounded like a freight train rumbling past.

A little after 3 p.m., the fire spread south toward a grouping of tanks, a loud whistling sound preceded a large explosion that launched a tank into the air. The tank landed about 60 feet from the site.

That afternoon, several tanks became airborne in the same fashion.

“A lot of oil tanks failed,” Lyman said. Minor explosions rocked the site and fireballs erupted from the site during the day as tanks failed, caught on fire or started to leak, he said.

Firefighters had to wait throughout the afternoon and evening for the remaining tanks to fail and for the explosion risk to subside. Once the explosion risk was reduced, firefighters went in with a foam fire suppression agent to subdue the blaze.

The foam agent, used for fighting liquid fire, goes over the fuel and cuts off the fire’s oxygen supply and cools it down, Lyman said.

He said he does not have a dollar amount for damage caused by the fire, but it will be substantial, he said.

In the surrounding area, the four homes closest to the site were evacuated as a precaution. Residents farther out reported hearing the sound of an explosion when the fire started.

“I heard a sound — boom,” said Kenny Griego, who lives south of the airport, about a mile away from the site of the fire. “And I heard someone say, ‘Half the world is on fire over there.’”

Sam Padilla, who was with Griego at the time of the explosion, said he saw a fire engine racing out to the scene right after he heard the explosion.

Cars and trucks pulled off the road near the intersection of Weld County roads 64 and 47, about half a mile northeast of the airport. Drivers left their vehicles and stood in the heavy rain watching the rising plume of smoke on the horizon.

Farther up the road, vehicles of emergency responders filled the road and parked along its shoulders.

Rain fell much of the day and heavy gray skies hung over scene. The clouds began to clear in the hours following the fire, and more cars pulled aside, their occupants watching the scene unfold from afar.

Throughout the afternoon, the tanks and a couple of semi-trucks parked nearby burned.

“The fire isn’t going anywhere,” Lyman said. The containment measures on site have worked as intended and kept the fire from spreading, he said.

The site, a wastewater injection facility owned by NGL Water Solutions, stored oil and gas wastewater, in preparation for injection into underground wells.

Though water was inside the fiberglass tanks, as oil and gas wastewater, it had traces of hydrocarbons, which create vapors. Those vapors were ignited by the lightning bolt, said Doug White, vice president of NGL Water Solutions.

“It was quite a lightning storm that was moving through here,” White said. “We’ve had it happen in Texas, several times, actually. That’s a part of the business. We don’t know the amount of damage. We’re still assessing the situation.”

In a prepared statement, NGL officials also vowed to participate fully in the investigation, once the fire was fully out.

When the fire began, units from the Greeley Fire Department and Eaton Fire Protection District responded to the blaze and closed roads around the site. Lyman said about 35 firefighters and eight firetrucks from Greeley were on scene, along with about five firefighters from Eaton Fire Protection District. The Colorado Oil and Gas Conservation Commission also had two people on scene monitoring the fire, he said.

In addition to the responders directly on scene, deputies from the Weld County Sheriff’s office helped control traffic around the fire and the Weld County Office of Emergency Management supplied equipment to assist fire containment efforts.

White said three employees were on site, as all of their facilities are manned 24/7, and none were injured in the resulting blaze. All were sent home for the day.

He said he had no concerns of spills at the site, noting its secondary containment systems held up well in the blaze. He said this facility will be shut down until it can be repaired. The company has several other injection sites throughout the county.

— Tribune reporter Sharon Dunn and photographer Joshua Polson contributed to this report

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