

Explosion damages power plant

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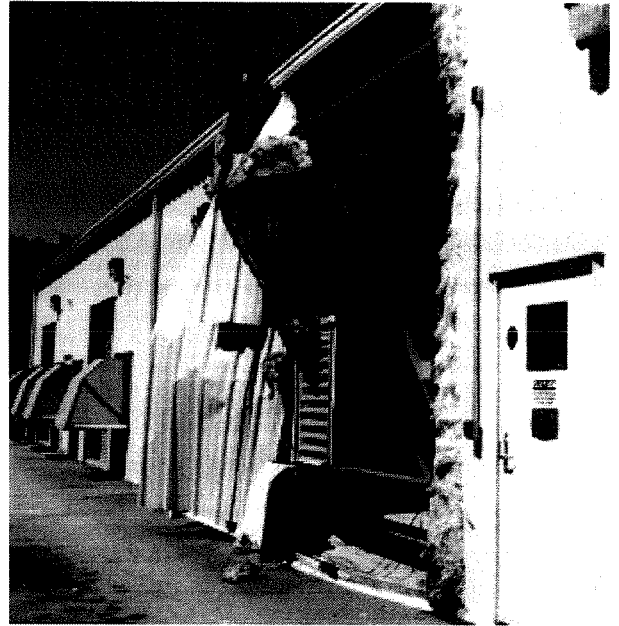
ROGER SIDEMAN and TARMO HANNULA

A methane explosion early Tuesday morning next to the Buena Vista Landfill ripped a hole through the wall of a new power plant that opened last year at the site.

The impact of the 2:09 a.m. explosion blew part of one metal wall out about 100 feet into a field and threw a section of another wall over a 12-foot cyclone fence, said Battalion Chief Ron Hart of Cal Fire at Corralitos, who served as the incident commander for the incident. It's still under investigation but it appears there was a strong leak in the system and that it ignited fairly rapidly," Hart said. "It blew up a third of the building."

Hart said that the magnitude of the blast must have suffocated the fire inside the structure and that most of the burnable material was thrust out into a surrounding grassy field. Hart said structural beams inside the building were damaged by the force of the blast. "We did have a small grass fire running up a hillside," Hart said, "But we got it under control right away."

Inside the building, the walls of an office were also heavily damaged by the blast and fire. "It's very fortunate that no one was inside the building at the time," Hart said. "They wouldn't have survived this. There was very significant damage.



The building, which is operated from a remote location, was vacant at the time. No one was injured.

Patrick Mathews, Santa Cruz County's recycling and solid waste services manager, said it appeared there was an accumulation of gas in a blower room where methane enters the plant from the landfill. We could tell there was a leak from somewhere in the room," said Mathews, who went out to inspect the scene around 4:30 a.m. "But the engine room itself, the control room and coolers were unaffected and the plant remains intact."

The flammable gas, a natural byproduct of rotting trash, is burned and generated at the plant, which is owned by Massachusetts-based Ameresco. The company is still investigating what caused the blast. A company representative could not be immediately reached for comment Tuesday.

Although the plant has been shut down for the time being, Mathews said the explosion would not cause any disruption in service for users. That's because the energy the power plant produces, enough to power about 3,000 homes, is fed into the state's power grid and is automatically offset by other power plants around the state.

Mathews said that a plant operator received an automated emergency alert at his home at the time of the explosion.

Built of mostly concrete and steel, the plant contains a series of cooling tanks where methane is chilled from 80 to 39 degrees. Under the watch of a control-room computer, it's burned in four, truck-sized 20-cylinder engines before entering the power grid.

The plant officially opened in a February 2006 ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by local elected officials.

Hart said Cal Fire was joined by Watsonville Fire, Aptos/La Selva Fire. Also, a fire crew was brought in to create a control line around the grass burn. Emergency officials were on the scene until 6:30 a.m.