

The Batavian - Large onion processing plant in Elba total loss after massive fire

By Howard B. Owens

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On Thanksgiving Day.

It was a massive fire. It consumed the entire onion packing and storage facility owned by the Torrey family. It's a facility that 15 years ago was owned by the Ognibene family, hence the name of the business location, "Big O Farms."

The facility is just a mile or so north on Transit Road from the Elba Mucklands, where the Torreys are one of the largest onion growers in the county.

Family members told firefighters that most of the recent season's crop was stored at other locations, so while about 1,000 crates of onions were lost, most of this season's harvest was not in the building.

What was in the building was all of the company's sorting and packing machines, all of which were destroyed in the fire.

"Obviously, these agriculture-design buildings have no built-in protection systems, so that's a game changer for us," said Tim Yaeger, emergency management coordinator. "Then not having the adequate water supply for us initially, we were playing catch-up the entire time."

Clearly, the fire started in the southeast corner of the building. The cause, however, is unknown. Yaeger said investigators will look at electrical and equipment as the potential spark that lit the inferno.

Elba crews were first on scene and started an exterior attack. Yaeger said that it's possible even by that time, given the wide-open spaces inside the building, the fire could have spread extensively.

It didn't take long for flames to reach the west end of the building, and a short time later, five- and six-foot high flames could be seen flitting through the roof.

Heavy equipment was brought in to knock down walls and open holes in the roof to help firefighters get water onto the fire.

But all morning, the water supply was a major obstacle to fighting the fire.

There was only one low-volume fire hydrant in the area, so as many as 20 tankers were called in from four counties to help shuttle water from fill sites (ponds, generally) and to porta-ponds set up on North Byron Road.

"Some of the primary fill sites weren't adequate because of the drought we had this past summer so they had to establish and look for other fill sites, which unfortunately were further away," Yaeger said. "Some points were four, five, six miles away."

While nobody wants to be dragged away from friends, family, parades and football to fight a fire on Thanksgiving Day, the timing of the fire had one benefit: plenty of manpower. Many volunteers were home today instead of at work on a typical Thursday.

"I was fearful on the way here when the alarm came in, you know, people go away, go to visit family, a lot people go out of town, so I was concerned about what our manpower situation was going to be," Yaeger said. "Surprisingly, it may have worked in our favor. We had more than adequate manpower."

Every fire company in Genesee County was mobilized in some way for the fire. If the department wasn't on scene, and most of them were, they were acting as standby or fill-in for the departments who did respond.

Responding from the county included Elba, Byron, South Byron, Bergen, Oakfield, Stafford, Alabama, Alexander, Le Roy, East Pembroke, Bethany, Pembroke and Indian Falls, with Darien and Pavilion placed on standby or fill-in.

Departments from Orleans County, including Albion and Barre, responded, as well as Brockport from Monroe County and inmates from Wyoming Correctional Facility.

All volunteers, all giving up all or a portion of their Thanksgiving to fight a fire.

But Yaeger suggested we not concentrate on the sacrifice of the volunteers.

"It's difficult, but our hearts and thoughts go out to the business owner," Yaeger said. "That's the primary concern. We don't ever want to see this kind of destruction. It's a total loss. That's our real thought. For the firefighters, to be away from their families is difficult, but that's what we do. In times of need, the fire services have got to be there and we were. It's unfortunate it was today."