

Chemical spill at UNB lab forces closure of forestry centre

BY NIKKIE SMYTHE

FREDERICTON (CUP) — A potentially explosive chemical spill last week at the University of New Brunswick's (UNB) Wood Sciences and Technology Centre sent 700 employees home for two days.

The university centre, which is off-campus, is located within the Hugh John Flemming Maritime Forestry Centre.

The 700 employees who were forced to leave are based in the Flemming complex.

Early last week, an employee at the technology centre noticed that a 12-by-14 foot walk-in freezer unit had malfunctioned overnight, raising the temperature in the freezer to the point that a potentially deadly explosion was a risk.

The freezer, which stores chemicals to make fibreglass and plastic, was kept at 8 degrees Celsius to ensure hazardous gases did not evolve.

If the freezer is allowed to rise to room temperature, the evolved gasses could combine with each other and spark an explosion.

The city's fire and police departments closed the centre and, after calling in a hazardous materials disposal unit from Oromocto, lo-

cated east of Fredericton, spent the day planning how to safely handle the situation without placing fire fighters at risk.

The spill was one of the most serious accidents to hit the city in years.

Fredericton police Sgt. Tim Cane said four members of the Hazardous Materials Unit were able to enter the freezer, where they discovered that a 5 litre container had exploded, spraying the interior of the freezer with a thick, black, tar-like substance.

Other 45 gallon drums had expanded and were on the brink of exploding as the chemicals they housed expanded after changing states from liquid to solid.

The 30 other containers appeared to be stable, but fire fighters installed a camera and a temperature gauge in the freezer to monitor the situation overnight.

On the morning of March 15 — the day after the accident was discovered — officials re-entered the room and began the process of removing the remaining containers.

According to Cane, university officials will be responsible for the safe disposal of the remaining containers and for clean up of the freezer.

Public safety officials said

they had contained the spill.

By Thursday, March 16, both the Flemming and UNB centres were re-opened and workers returned to work.

In the wake of the spill, university officials are initiating an internal review of chemical storage areas.

"An internal review will be

initiated immediately, jointly by my faculty, campus safety and the UNB Joint Health Safety Committee," said David MacLean, dean of UNB's Faculty of Forestry and Environmental Management.

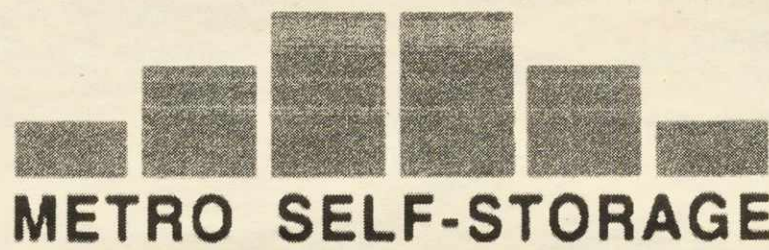
"They will examine the cause of the problem and any changes that need to be made in terms of facilities and chemical handling practices.

The committee will work with the Fredericton Fire Department and the New Brunswick Health, Safety and Compensation Commission to ensure the university meets standards for chemical storage."

A total of 19 federal, provincial, military, municipal and environmental agencies responded to the emergency.



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