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Chemicals cause fire

Fire protection needs changes, official says

By Colleen Kenney
Staff Reporter

The hazardous smoke has cleared from a July 16 chemical fire in Hamilton Hall, but UNL officials will have to make some changes before another chemical fire occurs, State Fire Marshal Wally Barnett said Aug. 13.

UNL laboratories containing hazardous chemicals should have water-reactive chemicals stored in water-proof cabinets instead of the wooden ones now in use, Barnett said.

And an exact list of all chemicals in each laboratory should be readily available to firemen, he said.

Lincoln firefighters spent about three hours on July 16 trying to extinguish

the fire in an eighth floor laboratory.

The fire caused about \$100,000 in damage and apparently started when an unidentified chemical, probably water-reactive metallic sodium, came in contact with moisture and burst into flames, said Del Weed, UNL's biosafety officer.

Barnett said the chemical ate through the wooden cabinet and possibly mixed with another chemical.

Chemicals

Weed said a list of about 100 chemicals in the laboratory was available, but Barnett suggested exact lists be posted on cabinet and laboratory doors to help firefighters.

A sign was posted on the door of the laboratory warning firemen that water should not be used to put out a chemical fire.

Chemicals stored in the laboratory were the most highly rated on a measure of hazards to health, flammability and toxicity, Weed said.

Lincoln fire chief Neil McPherson said a UNL professor at the scene could not tell firemen exactly what the fire and smoke was made of chemically.

"We're going to give them a chance to clean up their operation," Barnett said.

Elevator malfunction

Barnett said he did not know whether an apparent elevator malfunction was caused by human or mechanical error.

Last July 16, McPherson said, firefighters had to carry their equipment up eight flights of stairs to fight the fire. One elevator jammed on the eighth floor.

UNL maintenance officials said that although the elevators could have malfunctioned, they thought firemen's error is more likely.

Fire alarm

The key in the fire alarm panel must be held at the bypass position until the elevator's generator is ready, UNL Maintenance Manager Jerry Delhay said.

"The next day at a meeting we ran it through the paces and it worked fine," Delhay said. Three UNL maintenance workers got the elevators working during the fire, but after the firemen had already reached the fire by stairs, Delhay said.

Hamilton Hall and Oldfather Hall elevators operate the same way during a fire alarm, which is the most up-to-date method, he said.

"But there's no fail safe system," he said.

Weed said UNL officials have had training sessions with Lincoln firefighters in the past dealing with fire possibilities on campus, but future sessions are needed for more in-depth training about the chemicals stored in UNL buildings.

Safe exit

He said the early warning alarm system warned people inside Hamilton Hall in time. People exited quickly and safely, he said.

Weed said the Lincoln fire department took the proper precautions in putting the fire out.

Residue from the chemical fire was transported Monday to an Environmental Protection Agency waste site, Weed said.

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