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Ethanol inferno extinguished

By Angela Kamper, Matthew Denholm and wires

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FIREFIGHTERS have put out the huge blaze in an ethanol tank at Port Kembla, more than 20 hours after it exploded into flames.

An Ericksson air crane dumped thousands of litres of foam on top of the fire this morning, forming a blanket that smothered the flames.

A NSW Fire Brigade spokesman said the blaze went out about 6.30am but **14 fire crews would continue to spray the tank to ensure it did not flare up again.**

"Crews will still be there all day working to keep the tank cool until we get down below a temperature that will stop it reigniting," he said.

It would still be many hours before the temperature of the tank was low enough for officials to begin investigating the cause of the blaze, he said.

A NSW Fire Brigade spokesman said attempts last night to put out the blaze with 30,000 litres of foam dropped from an Erickson air crane had had little effect.

"It was just too fierce," he said.

Firefighters had let the blaze burn down overnight and had concentrated on protecting surrounding fuel tanks, he said.

Hundreds of workers were evacuated from around the site of the fire yesterday and a 500 metre exclusion zone set up.

No one was killed in the blast but a 56-year-old man was taken to Wollongong Hospital with minor burns.

Hundreds of workers ran for their lives after the 10.10am blast, which rocked areas up to 25km away and sparked a huge fire that sent flames and black smoke shooting 100m into the sky.

The roof was blown off the ethanol tank and cars parked 60m away across the road had their tail lights melted.

NSW Fire Brigade Commissioner Greg Mullins last night said he was reasonably confident the blaze would not spread to other tanks.

Mr Mullins said there had been initial problems controlling the heat from the blaze.

"When the roof blew off the tank it actually fell on top of built-in foam systems, which immediately rendered that inoperative as it did with some water systems," he said.

The cause of the explosion was not yet known.

Workers said a hissing sound could be heard moments before the blast.

"It sounded like a jet engine about to land," said National Hire manager Jim Sergovski, whose workshop is 50m from the blazing ethanol tank.

"I ran outside to see what the noise was, then the lid blew up into the air about 40m.

"When it came down everyone started scattering like rats. I didn't know what was happening - my body temperature changed, it was like an instant hot flush."

All 10 workers on the site were safe, including one found an hour after the blast.

Ambulance officer Bob Gray said one man was taken to hospital with minor burns and cuts.

Australian Workers Union secretary Bill Shorten said it was a miracle no one was killed.

"Incidents such as this one at Port Kembla, the Santos Gas Plant explosion at Moomba and the incident at Longford (near Sale) in 1998 shouldn't happen," Mr Shorten said.

"Hundreds of workers were put at risk."

The tank's owner Manildra Park Petroleum could face fines up to \$1 million if found to have breached its licence.

With AAP

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