

Water, water everywhere, but not a drop... HVP called into action at Hull dock fire

In October, Humberside Fire and Rescue Service mobilised their high volume pump (HVP) module to a live incident for the first time, to fight a major fire at Hull docks. FRS explains how the emergency developed.

The incident began on the morning of Sunday 22 October, with a deep-seated fire in some 250 tonnes of wood chip and waste timber at the Queen Elizabeth Dock in Hull. Six fire appliances responded to the fire, within 20 minutes of the first call, at 8.04am. At first, the scene of the incident appeared to be an isolated piece of ground with very few peripheral problems. It soon became clear that a number of issues could arise if prompt action was not taken.



Two firefighters use HVP equipment to fight the fire at the docks.

Chemical works

The fire at the dock was adjacent to the BP Saltend chemical works tank farm. To add to the problem, the tanks nearest to the fire contained naphtha – a highly flammable material. As a precaution, the BP fire team set up a number of monitors around the tank farm, to protect them until the fire could be contained.

Photo: Humberside FRS

Water, water everywhere...

Although the fire was located on Queen Elizabeth Dock, it was almost 2km from the nearest water source. For this reason both the Service's water support unit and the HVP were mobilised. The HVP is capable of pumping 7,000 litres of water a minute, but it was not just a question of dropping the pump into the dock and getting to work. At the time, the tide was going out and consideration had to be given to pumping additional water into the dock, so that ships in the dock would not be grounded.

Laying the hose

Laying 2km of hose along the docks could bring with it a number of problems, so it was fortunate that the incident took place over the weekend, when traffic levels were low. Although the prime movers and water support unit were used to lay most of the hose, there were a number of points where the hose had to be sited manually. Close multi-agency and local industry consultation ensured that disruption was kept to a minimum. At one point a small tunnel had to be dug to lay the 150mm hose underneath rail tracks.

Environmental issues

In addition to the problems of the neighbouring tank farm, Area Manager Tony Grayson was faced with several environmental issues. The first concern was about the large plume of smoke. Predictions for the plume were requested from the Met Office in Exeter. The health authority carried out a smoke and risk analysis to consider the impact on nearby housing if the wind should change direction.

As well as balancing environmental concerns in relation to the smoke plume and run-off water, Tony Grayson found that the fire was very close to a nature reserve, home to a number of protected species. English Nature was consulted about the incident and asked if they wished to attend and carry out any damage limitation work at the scene.

Fighting the fire

Mechanical shovels from an adjacent storage company were used to move as much of the mulch product as possible before it caught fire. Owing to the speed and strength of the wind, this initiative was not as successful as it could have been. The fire was successfully brought under control at 11.47pm on Sunday evening. Associated British Ports, the owners of the site, accepted responsibility for the scene and additional security staff were despatched to monitor the remains of the fire. It was anticipated that the mulch would smoulder for some days after the fire and rescue service had left the scene. In fact, fire appliances made regular visits to the site during the following week to keep the fire site damped down.

HVP in action

This was the first time that the HVP module had been mobilised to a real incident in Humberside. As well as proving its worth in fighting the fire, it also gave the Humberside FRS an opportunity to confirm their mobilising and welfare procedures, in readiness for future incidents. At its peak, there were 53 Humberside FRS personnel in attendance at the fire. Without the HVP this number would have been much higher.

HVP equipment, supplied by Communities and Local Government's New Dimension Programme, also played a key role in tackling the fire at the Buncefield fuel depot in Hemel Hempstead December 2005.

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