Damage exceeds $1 million in P&C Dock Company fire

By MARK TODD

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CONNEAUT - A Monday evening fire caused more than $1 million damage to coal transporting equipment at the Pittsburgh and Conneaut Dock Company, officials said.

More than 100 yards of rubber conveyor belts, as well as other gear, were destroyed by fire that ignited in the upper coal facility north of Thompson Road, a short distance from the Pennsylvania line, firefighters said.

Conneaut Fire Chief Bim Orrenmaa said he understood the dollar value on the damage could approach $1.5 million.

Ed Richardson, a dock company spokesman at Monroeville, Pa., said the damage is still being studied and no dollar estimate has been prepared. "In another day or two we'll get an assessment," he said.

The fire will not severely crimp operations at the dock company's coal facility, Richardson said. Other coal transport equipment, temporarily out of service for maintenance, will be re-activated, he said.

"We'll start up the lower coal facility," Richardson said. "We can put back that area fairly quickly."

Coal-related activity in Conneaut has been sluggish, also helping to minimize the fire's impact, he said.

"The volume of coal into Conneaut has been slow," Richardson said. "(The fire) won't cause any major disruption."

More than 60 firefighters from all three Conneaut stations, North Kingsville, Monroe Township and Jefferson were dispatched to the fire, which created thick clouds of black smoke visible across East Conneaut.

Fire scorched a coal transport complex that included a lengthy stretch of conveyor belts, as well as coverings for the belts and machinery and a massive device that flips railroad coal cars upside down, dumping their contents into a deep pit. A series of belts move the coal out of the pit and to adjacent outdoor storage areas.

Flames soared at various spots in the area, firefighters said. One crew descended 25 feet into the pit to douse a stubborn fire.

The transport system was not operating at the time, and hadn't been used since Saturday, Richardson said.

Firefighters said dock company employees told them a new type of coal, one with a lower ignition point, was introduced to the complex recently, and may have ignited spontaneously.

"The coal was like a fine, powdery dust," Orrenmaa said.

Dock company officials are trying to pin down a likely cause, Richardson said. "We don't know the source of the fire," he said.

Richardson praised the efforts of firefighters, and said the outcome could have been much worse. "At least nobody got hurt," he said.