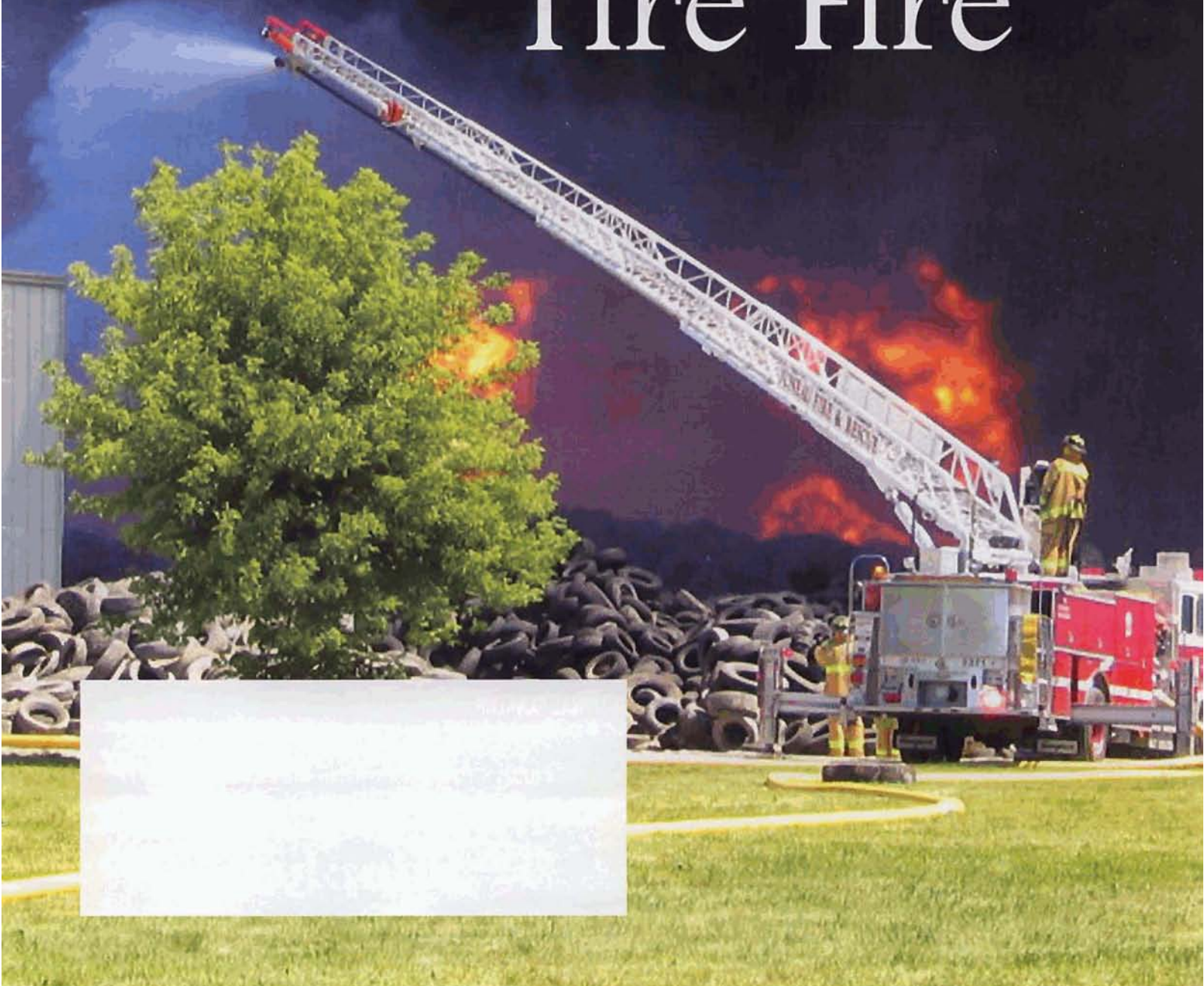


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If you had to make a difficult choice, how would you decide whether it was better to let a fire burn, and contaminate the air, or to light it, and contaminate the groundwater? That was just one of the many tough decisions confronting Watertown Fire Chief Henry Butts when he arrived at the scene of a massive fire at the Watertown Tire Recyclers plant in July.

"We received the alarm on a Tuesday morning about 4 minutes to 10, and responded with our normal structure fire response," Chief Butts said. "When we were about 1/2 mile away from the fire station, you could already see it."

What the chief and his firefighters saw, still about a mile and a half in the distance, was a huge plume of potentially toxic smoke coming from a field of approximately 1 million burning tires covering an area measuring about 50x50 feet wide and piled about 30 feet high.

Coincidentally, a DNR representative was already on the scene before the fire broke out, "actually having a meeting with the owner." Residents from Watertown and the surrounding area had been expressing concern for some time that the plant, reportedly licensed to hold 200,000 tires, had been steadily increasing the number of tires stored on the property.

The chief asked what course of

action the DNR wanted the firefighters to take. Since environmental issues were at stake, it was up to the DNR to analyze the situation.

The choices were limited at that point to contaminating the groundwater by putting water on the tires, or contaminating the air by letting the tires burn themselves out.

The chief knew he had a major job on his hands, whatever the course of action, so he initially called in 12 departments from Dodge and Jefferson counties.

With the fire burning only about 100 feet from the plant and administrative office on the site, "We first started to cut the fire off from the plant, but then the wind shifted, and when the wind shifted, blowing out of the north, it endangered my people and equipment, so I ordered them to withdraw."

It quickly became evident to the experienced eyes of the chief, who's been the Watertown Fire Chief for seven years, and before that came from a fire department near Orlando, Florida, that there would be no stopping this fire, and no way to save the building.

The firefighters set up master streamers on the west side of the property shooting into the building as well as aerial devices shooting down, hitting the tire field.

"We changed strategy to try to

contain the fire, and that strategy worked," the chief said. They managed to save the company administrative offices, containing all the owner's crucial financial and business information, however, the plant part of the building burned and was completely destroyed.

A major obstacle to fighting this fire was the unavailability of water. The tire facility was way out in the country, and the nearest hydrants were two miles away, back in town. "We were running out all the time. The amount of water needed to fight the fire exceeded our supply. We were two miles outside of town, and were using four different hydrants in town to fill the tankers with water. It takes five minutes to fill each one," explained the chief. Not to mention the time needed to roll the hoses up and get on their way back to the fire.

"The fire was taking 8,000 to 10,000 gallons a minute, sustained, to fight it. Imagine the logistics of getting enough tankers, which hold a capacity of 3000 gallons each."

The tires continued to burn, threatening other buildings and several acres of nearby bean fields. Area news stations, as well as their Internet sites, had been carrying reports on the progress of the fire. Channel3000.com reported on the difficulty of fighting tire fires. They compared the Watertown fire to a

tire fire in Virginia in 1983 that took months to put out, and another in California in 1999 that did not burn out for 30 days.

But as the news reports continued to present bleak updates on the fire's progress, and local health officials issued advisories to keep people inside because the widespread smoke was contaminating the air, something close to a miracle happened.

"Talk about the bond between fire fighters," the chief said. "A guy from Milwaukee, who had seen the news reports, called to tell us about this stuff called F500, a containment agent that encapsulates the tires."

Watertown fire department personnel had never heard of F500 before, which is an additive specifically designed for this particular type of fire.

"It's difficult to fight a fire with no water readily available, and this stuff was beautiful, it worked great."

F500 helps the water get down deep into the piles of tires but "it's not a foam," the chief explained. "The problem with foam is, typically, if you run out of foam, you can never go back to

using water. I didn't know how much of the F500 I would need with six acres of tires on fire. So they brought about 2000 gallons of that stuff up here. We put the fire out, and we still have some of it left."

Still sounding happily amazed at the effectiveness of the F500, he said the total time spent fighting the fire was 130 hours, 30 minutes.

"At the Dodge County Emergency Management Command Post, somebody asked me how long it would burn. When I said about a week, someone said 'you're kidding.' I said no. These things can usually burn for 30 to 90 days. That stuff worked great."

The entire operation was a huge success. With a fire of that magnitude, and with so many departments responding, there was only one minor, heat-related injury. And out of four buildings, including two occupied houses, that could have been destroyed, only one, the tire recycling plant building, was completely destroyed.

While this fire was huge, it may not have been the biggest fire in



Photos courtesy, Sarah Butts, Watertown Fire Department



Watertown history. "The biggest fire was in 2001 when we had two very large fires, one in a foundry and one in an abandoned mill complex," the chief said. However, it was the "largest coordinated emergency response in the history of the state of Wisconsin. From that standpoint, it was the biggest, but the biggest fire we've seen, no."

As far as the chief's original dilemma of choosing between air or groundwater contamination, the F500 does make its way into the groundwater, but the EPA and the DNR were shown the ingredients prior to using it on this fire, and determined it would result in much less contamination than what the tires were putting into the ground..

The fire did contaminate a creek in the area. At the time of this interview, the EPA had the creek dammed up and contained and was implementing a fil-

tration system to clean the water. While several local residents expressed concern at a recent town hall meeting about their well water being tainted, the DNR and EPA assured them they would continue testing and monitoring the water.

Air quality was also affected. "The wind shifted 360 degrees during the course of the fire and everybody got a taste of it. Our local health officer went into action and canceled all outdoor activities, and closed the town pool. It had negative effects for everybody."

While the effects of the fire were obvious, the cause of the fire was still undetermined.

"We don't know how the fire started," said the chief. "The State Fire Marshal is still trying to determine the cause. **WJ**

