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Work crews sort rubble Thursday at the site of the May 26 fire. On Memorial Day weekend, the old abandoned Light Grain Flour Mill burned to the ground just feet from the Equity Grain Elevators. Firefighters swarmed the area and fought the blaze for more than six hours to keep it from compromising the grain elevators. Equity Manager Doug Werner said it was helpful the elevators were in a very clean condition, thus eliminating possible dust particles from causing an explosion. L&T photo/Larry Phillips

‘We go through a lot of brooms,’ manager says

By RACHEL COLEMAN

• Leader & Times

Wheat harvest is just around the corner, but the clamor on the grounds at Equity Exchange of Liberal has nothing to do with combines or grain. Backhoes scrape at the charred wood and scrap metal, separating the materials into orderly piles.

They're cleaning up the remains of Light Grain and Milling, the long-vacant building that stood just adjacent to the grain elevator and burned to the ground May 26.

Liberal fire chief Kelly Kirk explained that the 30 mph gusts of wind and the size of the fire meant firefighters had to focus on a defensive attack. Their goal was to contain the fire and prevent it from igniting grain dust in the elevator.

After more than six hours, the fire crews succeeded, averting what could have been a catastrophic explosion.

Equity manager Doug Werner had driven into town that evening when he heard the news that a fire had broken out.

"I came over immediately and was here till 2 or 3 in the morning," he said. He checked with firefighters, then "went all around the elevator checking different areas."

By morning, the worst of the crisis had ended, and Werner heaved a sigh of relief.

Now that the emergency has been reduced to a clean-up project, Werner is sure the Equity's normal operating policies helped minimize the danger.

"We keep the elevator really clean," he said. "We're constantly sweeping. The people who work here are very good at doing that. We go through a lot of brooms, probably a couple a month. It's something we kind of joke about."

Having as little airborne dust as possible is not just a local choice.

“We have three levels of inspections going on all the time,” Werner said. “There are inspections by our insurance company, inspections by government agencies, and I also do inspections. It’s something we take very seriously.”

At this point, no one has discovered what started the fire in the old mill building.

“I don’t know what happened, the fire inspectors don’t know what happened,” he said, “but I know we’re all being more cautious. We want to make sure the elevator is safe for the community.”

Werner pointed out that elevator explosions are rare, because “you’ve got to have perfect conditions for an elevator to blow up like we’ve seen in the news over the last several years. It takes the perfect amount of oxygen, the perfect amount of dust in the air, and that doesn’t have a chance to happen when you’re keeping the elevator scrubbed.”

The fire destroyed fertilizer stored in a warehouse, but Werner said that was not reason for future worries. The type of fertilizer stocked and sold by Equity Exchange is not the highly flammable substance that played a role in a recent explosion in West, Texas.

In fact, the most dangerous element of the Equity facility is probably one that should not be there at all: pedestrians and vehicles that use the dirt road next the the elevator as a shortcut between Pershing Ave. and Kansas Ave.

“It would really help if people would stop doing that,” Werner said. “Kids sometimes walk between the elevators, and we don’t know what they’re doing. People smoke, they drive around the trucks and equipment, and it creates all kinds of problems.”

With safety built into the daily routine, Equity employees will focus on the upcoming wheat harvest.

“Between the drought and the freeze, it probably won’t be much of a harvest,” Werner said, “but we’re hoping we’ll be surprised.”

Since farming is all about long-term commitments, a hopeful attitude, and good stewardship, Werner sees a bright future for the Equity Exchange. The fire and cleanup are just temporary problems.

“We want to be a positive member of the community, and we do everything we can to keep our facility safe,” he said. “We hope to continue to improve it and be a part of Liberal. Our goal is to help our customers with services and products that help farmers.”

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