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Evacuations, one injury in explosion, fire at La Verne water facility

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Parts of La Verne were under evacuation orders Tuesday as firefighters worked to contain a lithium ion battery blaze following an explosion at a Metropolitan Water District of Southern California facility at 3201 Wheeler Ave.

La Verne Fire Department Battalion Chief and Public Information Officer Mark Savage said the agency was called to the fire at 11:42 a.m. Los Angeles County Fire Department and La Verne police also responded.

The Metropolitan Water District uses solar panels to harness energy and stores that energy at an outdoor lithium battery storage facility, Savage said.

"As soon as we arrived, there was an explosion in that storage facility there that blew the doors off the storage compartment," Savage said. " It certainly got all of our attention, did not injury any of our firefighters, and then we went to work."

One person suffered minor injuries but was "assessed, treated and transported to a local facility," Savage said. "My understanding they're in good condition."

The City of La Verne posted this update at 6:15 p.m.: "All affected agencies, the City, MWD, and South Coast Air Quality Management District are currently meeting to coordinate next steps and confirm the most current information related to the incident. More information to follow shortly."

Firefighters worked with LA County Fire and the County of Los Angeles Fire Department Health Hazardous Materials Division to monitor smoke and water runoff.

"We're still cooling," Savage said while speaking to reporters at 3 p.m. "We are now able to put water directly on to that battery storage facility unit … We are gaining the upper hand, however, we still have batteries and trying to get those completely cooled down. They're not off-gassing any product whatsoever. We are not there yet, and that's why we still have some of this still under

evacuation. But I think things are going to continue to progress in the right direction."

Evacuation orders were reduced at 3 p.m. to only areas adjacent to the facility between Foothill Boulevard to the north, Moreno Avenue to the west, Bonita Avenue to the south, and B Street to the east.

"If you are in still in that area, we don't want you in there until we get this completely under control," Savage said.

Nearby Damien and Bonita high schools and the University of La Verne canceled classes for the day. Businesses in old town La Verne also closed.

Savage said the fire did not extend to any other part of the facility and that their water supply was not being impacted.

Evacuation warnings were issued at 2:31 p.m. for much of the area west and south of the facility. Advisories were issued for areas east of B Street, north of Foothill Boulevard, and small area between San Dimas Canyon Road and Damien Avenue.