

Suspected arson at tyre dump near Madrid forces evacuations (Update)

May 13 2016



A huge smoke column caused by a fire at a tyre dump near the town of Sesena pictured from the Almudena cathedral in Madrid on May 13, 2016

A huge tyre dump near Madrid was ablaze Friday, releasing a black cloud of toxic fumes and forcing the evacuation of nearby residents after what officials suspect was an arson attack.

Firefighters and water-dropping helicopters battled to extinguish the

blaze which broke out before dawn at the tyre dump near the town of Sesena, 45 kilometres (28 miles) south of Madrid.

"Everything points to the fact that this disaster was deliberate," Sesena Mayor Carlos Velazquez told Spanish radio, adding that there had been days of rain in the area, making accidental ignition unlikely.

The government of the Castilla-La Mancha region where the dump is located said it had activated an emergency action plan as it fears the fire could last for days.

Authorities in Castilla-La Mancha warned the blaze had produced a "toxic cloud" which could affect part of Sesena, ordering the evacuation of a residential area on Friday afternoon.

"Eighty percent of the residents of the area have already been moved and we will evacuate the remaining 20 percent," said a spokesman for the emergency services who added that about 1,000 people will stay in sports centres overnight.

The tyre dump stretches over 10 hectares (25 acres), the equivalent of about 10 football pitches, and straddles the Castilla-La Mancha and Madrid regions.



A huge column of smoke caused by a fire at a tyre dump near the town of Sesena pictured from the Almudena cathedral in Madrid on May 13, 2016

By late morning, three-quarters of the site had been scorched, Madrid's emergency services said on Twitter. No injuries have been reported.

'It's confined'

Luis Villarroel, a Madrid firefighting official at the scene, said in a video

posted on Twitter that the blaze was gradually being brought under control.

"It's confined to a few zones," he said, adding that the smoke was less intense than it had been earlier in the day.

The cloud emanating from the blaze appeared to be moving southward as the day went on, sparing Madrid and its international airport, according to Vicente Garcia, a spokesman for the environmental group Ecologists in Action.

Garcia criticised authorities in Madrid and Castilla-La Mancha for failing to clear the tyres.



A huge smoke column caused by a fire in a tyre dump near the town of Sesena pictured from the Almudena cathedral in Madrid on May 13, 2016

The massive stack of tyres started to form in the 1990s when a company began using the site as a temporary depot for old tyres due to be recycled.

But over the years these started to accumulate, resulting in three-metre (10-feet) high piles.

Environmentalists have for years warned that the dump poses a health hazard, and the town of Sesena has lived in fear of the rubber mound catching fire.

Such blazes are notoriously difficult to extinguish and have been known to last for months and even years, as tyres often continue to burn inside even if they are extinguished from the outside. They also reignite easily.

Emiliano Garcia-Page, president of the Castilla-La Mancha region, warned that the fire could last "for several days."

At the end of 2015, Madrid and Castilla-La Mancha invited bids to empty the dump and destroy the tyres, but the process has yet to start.

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Citation: Suspected arson at tyre dump near Madrid forces evacuations (Update) (2016, May 13) retrieved 30 May 2023 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-05-huge-tyre-dump-madrid-toxic.html>

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