

# Calgary chemical fire forces evacuations



*Smoke billows out of the warehouse*

Wednesday November 7, 2001

## Thousands forced to flee toxic smoke

By [PETER SMITH](#) and MICHAEL WOOD, SUN MEDIA

CALGARY -- Alberta Environment sounded the all-clear for Calgary residents to return to their homes at 5:30 p.m. last night - nearly 10 hours after a southeast factory fire broke out. Thousands had been evacuated from homes, businesses and schools earlier in the day when toxic chemical-laced smoke spewed into the sky. "The fire has been totally extinguished and there is no further danger to the area residents," said fire Capt. John Conley. The all-clear came after officials from Alberta Environment and the city fire department's hazardous material experts tested the air quality in the area.

Calgary Health Region officials were last night advising residents who find soot, smoke or dust in their homes downwind of the fire to wipe the area with soap and water while wearing rubber gloves. "All outdoor child play areas should be washed down and, as a precaution, wipe down all indoor children's toys," said region spokesman Doug Fraser.

Fire officials have established the chemicals burning in the Dura-Lite Heat Transfer Products building included the potentially poisonous trichloroethylene used in the manufacture of truck parts, plus xylene, magnesium and acetylene. "Each has its own characteristics, but there was a concern from our standpoint that when mixed and burning they could be dangerous," Conley said. "Fortunately, the smoke plume was rising almost vertically," said Mike Plato, of the city's emergency medical services. "If the wind had been blowing into the (nearby) residential area, we could have had a significant problem."

While nearly 50 firefighters tackled the blaze, more than 60 police officers fanned out through the residential streets and business district, spearheading the evacuation. Trichloroethylene is a colourless liquid which is used as a solvent for cleaning metal parts, according to the Atlanta-based Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

The agency warns that breathing high levels of trichloroethylene may affect the nervous system and cause liver and lung damage, abnormal heartbeat, coma and possibly death. For many residents, yesterday's blaze was the climax of several frustrating years of fighting city hall about the industrial factories beyond their backyards.

"For years we've complained to the city about this," said Muriel Young, a substitute teacher who has lived in the area for more than 40 years. "These people should never have been allowed to move in here. We're fed up living with these fumes, and this is the culmination of it all."

Tuesday November 6, 2001

CALGARY - A chemical fire after an explosion at a warehouse in southeast Calgary on Tuesday morning forced people in the neighbourhood to leave their factories, offices, homes and schools. Emergency officials evacuated everyone within a one kilometre radius of the Dura-Lite plant in southeast Calgary after concerns about toxic smoke from the blaze. By early afternoon, the size of the evacuation zone had been cut in half. The areas surrounding the manufacturing plant were blocked off and people were being told they couldn't yet go back to their homes or business.

Officials are concerned about toxic fumes from the fire at Dura-Lite Heat Transfer Products Ltd., which makes air coolers for trucks and buses. The chemical causing most concern is trichloroethylene, an industrial degreaser and dry-cleaning agent. It is a suspected carcinogen and high concentrations can lead to coma. Witnesses say after the explosion, flames and black smoke shot up 100 metres, dropping embers on nearby neighbourhoods.

City buses have been sent to the area to provide temporary shelter for people. There have been no reports of injuries. The company employs 100 people.