

Homeland Security grant arms firefighters with foam

500-gallons per-minute for Fire District 6

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AYER -- On Monday, firefighters gathered around a new piece of critical fire-fighting apparatus, put through its paces on a test run behind the West Main Street Fire Station. That's when the Ayer Fire Department took delivery of a new 500-gallon per minute foam trailer.

Ayer fire engines already had some foam capacity, with 30 gallons on board. But the new \$84,000 foam trailer -- paid for with a Homeland Security grant -- significantly increases the ability to fight fires not extinguished by water.

A recent case in point was the fully involved, smoky tire fire at JP Routhier's tire reclamation yard off Willow Road last August. Crews and apparatus from Shirley, Littleton, Devens, Harvard, Groton and Westford were called to aid in the firefight against mountains of blazing, stockpiled rubber tires.

A single tire contains about two gallons of oil. The high heat made the scene effectively a flammable-liquids fire which called for massive amounts of foam --quick.

"Holden had the closest foam for that fire," said Ayer Chief Robert Pedrazzi. "We wouldn't have been able to put out that fire without it."

With the railroads, industries and highways, Pedrazzi knew that Ayer -- and Fire District 6 at large -- needed its own foam trailer.

Pedrazzi wrote the grant resulting in the \$84,000 foam trailer being delivered, thanks to a Homeland Security grant administered by the Northeast [Homeland Security] Regional Advisory Council (NERAC). NERAC oversees emergency preparedness for 85 communities in the event of a natural or manmade disaster. Manchester-by-the-Sea Fire Department Chief Andrew Paskalis sits on the council. He noted Pedrazzi's diligence in seeking out the funding.

"There was a need to get something for a quicker response for that district," said Paskalis. "We had funding available."

Pedrazzi listed some of the 'hot spots' where the foam trailer would come into play.

"There's the rail yard, an ethanol/methanol windshield wiper plant on Fitchburg Road, the tires, and Devens," said Pedrazzi. There's also a major 2-megawatt National Grid power station on Raddison Road where eight massive transformers are each oil-cooled with 3,000 gallons of oil (for a total of 24,000 gallons of oil). There is a multimillion dollar fire suppression system inside the station, but Pedrazzi said "if needed outside, we'd use this foam trailer there."

Ethanol gas additives pose their own challenges and require separate foam to treat hot-burning alcohol-fueled fires. This trailer can handle it.

Littleton Fire Chief Stephen Carter watched Monday's demonstration. He said there is "big highway need" for the trailer. "This is the only one in District 6. Otherwise I'm screaming for Hanscom" Air Force Base in Bedford.

"We can empty this thing in 8 minutes if you flowed all the hand lines," said Carter. According to 2005 data, 10 percent of the 165,000 vehicles a day passing along the Littleton stretch of the Route 2 and Interstate 495 corridors are commercial carriers. Carter said as recently as last weekend a serious tanker truck accident on Route 2 posed an explosion risk where a foam trailer would have been crucial.

Something seemingly as mundane as a hardware store supply truck accident posed a similar explosion risk in 2008.

"Propane, fertilizer, fuel, ammonia, cleaning products -- if you sit down and mix that all together, you've got a problem," said Carter.

But the foam trailer is a key part of the solution for local responders.