

Lewiston-Auburn

# Fire-suppression error sends foam pouring out of airport hangar

Staff Report

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AUBURN — Firefighters responding to the Lufthansa hangar at the Auburn-Municipal Airport on Monday morning walked into a wall of foam over their heads after a malfunction in the fire suppression system that filled the building with foam and briefly trapped four people inside.

"Apparently, they were working on the system when there was an error," said Fire Chief Geoff Low. "When it discharges, it fills the entire hangar. We did have some initial reports of some people that were lost inside. We were able to locate them — they were up on an upper level, so they were able to actually stay out of the product and we were able to get them down."

A few people were covered in foam and some inhaled it. Two were taken to the hospital, Low said. They were expected to be checked out and released.

The call initially came in around 9 a.m. Don Stevens, part of an Auburn Water and Sewer District crew doing routine work to a sewer pump station by the airport fence, said first he heard what sounded like a generator firing up.

"We look over and (foam) just starts pouring out all the doors, all the way around," Stevens said. "We all took a five minute break to watch."

At one point, a truck driving through the foam appeared to hit the building. Foam poured onto the lawn around the hangar and onto cars in the parking lot looking like out-of-season snowbanks.

"We thought it was going to take out the port-a-potties (right outside the hangar); it was going right by it," he said.

The Department of Environmental Protection and the local water district have been alerted, Low said.

The high expansion foam is made by Ansul.

"There's a fair amount of air in it, it's relatively easy to move through it, but it will engulf a person if it's up over their head," Low said. "When we talked to the reps at Ansul, they conveyed that it's essentially a dish detergent and basically (once someone comes in contact with it), it's a simple flushing of the person, get them a shower and get them cleaned up."

He estimated foam reached 20 to 25 feet high inside the hangar. Lufthansa Technik has been restoring a Lockheed Super Star Constellation aircraft at the site and Low said one plane was inside the building being repaired when the system went off.

He anticipated damages between the foam and water from the sprinklers that followed.

"The wind will play a big part in breaking the foam blanket down," he said. "We may assist a little bit with water application."

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