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Fires give crews work into holiday weekend

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THE OLYMPIAN

A 35-acre brush fire and a propane-fueled explosion kept firefighters in south Thurston County busy in separate incidents Friday.

□ The fire started about 5:20p.m. in the Black River-Mima Prairie Glacial Heritage Preserve, southwest of Littlerock. A southwesterly wind blowing at 10 mph swept the fire through tall grass, brush and Scotch broom. It grew large enough to cause concern for homes in a nearby housing development. Fire crews from several Thurston County fire districts were called to stand by if the homes needed to be defended.

"This thing took off," said Travis Peeks, the incident commander for the state Department of Natural Resources.

The fire spewed brown smoke into the sky. Several passers-by stopped alongside the road to watch. By 8 p.m., crews still were dousing the smoldering field with water, forming a smoky haze in the pink sunset.

The blaze started not far from where DNR crews had set a controlled fire Thursday. The "prescribed" fire was set as part of a restoration plan to help rid the preserve of noninvasive plants. Fires have been set in the preserve each year during the past five years, said Eric Delvin, Thurston County project manager with The Nature Conservancy.

The controlled fire was about 25 acres. While some areas still were smoldering Friday, officials said they felt it was unlikely one fire caused the other. The cause of Friday's blaze was under investigation, Peeks said.

But about 10 wildland firefighters monitoring Thursday's location were on-hand when the second fire ignited.

The preserve contains 1,020 acres of native prairie habitat. The restoration work is paid for by the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife.

A dirt road that loops around the preserve helped firefighters get control of the flames, Peeks said.

About three hours earlier, firefighters from Thurston County Fire District 1 responded to a loud explosion at the Blue Rhino propane distribution center at 20810 Old Hwy. 99 S.W. in Grand Mound.

Firefighters arrived to find about 36 5-gallon propane tanks engulfed in flames, the fire district reported.

The blast was caused by an employee venting excess propane from the tanks. Fire officials think a forklift operating nearby may have ignited the vapors, causing the explosion. Six tanks exploded during the fire, the fire district reported.

The employee was taken to Providence St. Peter Hospital with burns to his hands, arms and face, the fire district reported. Firefighters quickly extinguished the flames.
