



GENARO MOLINA / Los Angeles Times

A firefighter takes a break among the boxes of produce that were charred in warehouse fire on San Pedro Street.

1 Killed, 5 Injured in Blast, Fire

■ **Blaze:** More than 100 firefighters respond to explosion at produce warehouse. Damage is confined to single business.

By GEORGE RAMOS
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An explosion and fire gutted a fruit and produce company Tuesday in the industrial district south of downtown Los Angeles, killing one worker and injuring five others.

More than 100 Los Angeles firefighters spent nearly 90 minutes knocking down the spectacular fire, Deputy Fire Chief Bob Neamy said. The smoke could be seen for several miles and slowed traffic on the nearby Santa Monica Freeway.

The cause of the fire at the Pan American Banana Co. is under investigation, but city fire officials were looking at the possibility that a flammable ripening agent was involved.

Fire officials said a bottle of the

substance, used to accelerate the ripeness of bananas and other fruit, was found in the charred structure.

Investigators were also looking into reports of a propane gas leak at the time of the explosion, which rocked the 1100 block of South San Pedro Street shortly before 11 a.m.

Fire officials said it may be some time before the cause of the fire is finally determined.

One worker was found dead inside the one-story warehouse, apparently killed by the explosion, authorities said. The man's identity was being withheld pending notification of his family.

A second worker was taken to County-USC Medical Center with burns over 8% of his body, a hospital spokeswoman said. The worker, who was not immediately identified, also suffered internal injuries and was listed in critical condi-

tion late Tuesday.

Four others were treated at the scene for minor burns.

The explosion blew out the west wall of the fruit and produce company, sending flames almost 100 feet into the air. The charred remains of stacked bananas, onions, pears and papayas were strewn throughout the warehouse and an adjacent alley.

One man who works nearby said that after the explosion, he saw a man rush into the warehouse to pull out a worker who had been pinned down by debris in the burning building. "That man was lucky someone was there to help him," said Jose Aurelio Casado, 22, of Bell, who works across the street.

Another worker said the force of the blast nearly knocked a computer off a table in a business across the street from the warehouse.

"I've never heard anything like that before," said Robert Mulder, 38.

Firefighters were able to contain the fire to the single business.