

LEAVITT WANTS AGENCY TO REPORT ABOUT TREE

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Gov. Mike Leavitt wants a full report from the state agency responsible for putting up the Christmas tree blamed for a fire that severely damaged the Governor's Mansion.

Both state and local authorities believe the Wednesday morning fire started in a string of Christmas lights on the 25-foot tree placed in the mansion's open center by the state Division of Facilities and Construction Management. Division officials have confirmed the tree was not treated with fire retardant and had been decorated by volunteers with dry moss on the trunk and stacks of wood along the base.

The lack of fire retardant and the type of decorations may have contributed to the speed at which flames traveled up the tree, according to fire investigators.

"There needs to be a full explanation of what happened. We'll get the report . . . and the appropriate things will occur," the governor told reporters Thursday.

"I've asked the division to look at every aspect of the tree," Leavitt said. "They brought it in, they decorated it, and they maintained it."

The governor's wife, Jacalyn, and their 3-year-old son, Westin, were home when the fire started along with two staff members and a work crew. Everyone escaped safely.

Carol Bench, the first lady's executive assistant, attempted to put the fire out with a nearby fire extinguisher just after it started, but the flames had spread too fast.

Wearing a suit that smelled slightly of smoke, the governor also said he hopes the mansion can be restored by next Christmas. But he said the restoration schedule suggested by state officials may have been overly ambitious.

"I've remodeled too many times myself to know it always takes double the time", Leavitt said.

He said he has instructed the state agencies involved in the project to take as much time as necessary to restore the historic building to its former condition.

"I want it done right. There's no reason to rush and get us back in," Leavitt said. The governor's family is staying in a hotel while Leavitt searches for another temporary home.

The governor, his wife, and their five children would like to return to their private home in the Yalecrest area of Salt Lake City. The home was recently leased to a couple.

The Leavitts lost almost all of their personal belongings in the fire, including two years of the governor's personal journals. The children's memory books, filled with photographs, were not seriously damaged.

"We're basically starting over in terms of items we use on a day-to-day basis," the governor said, but both he and his wife stressed the family is in good shape.

"I keep thinking how grateful I am, even when I look at my favorite things" that have been lost, Jacalyn Leavitt said. She wore a pink T-shirt to the press conference.

Because of the fire, all social events scheduled at the mansion this week have been canceled. Hundreds of people were expected at an open house Friday for state appointees and at a party for the media on Saturday.