

Fire still smoldering

State may be called in to pull pile apart, put out blaze; city's bad air keeps getting worse.

By Mark Grossi, Barbara Anderson and Pablo Lopez

The Fresno Bee, (Published Thursday, January 16, 2003, 7:15 AM)

With lung-patient visits more than doubling at one hospital, Fresno officials Wednesday announced the state may take over the job of snuffing an air-fouling fire in a huge, southwest Fresno woodpile.

The \$250,000 cost would be picked up by the state.

The fire in the pile -- which is equivalent to the size of a football field filled two stories high -- smoldered for a fifth day Wednesday. Its plume continued wafting into the sky, making life miserable for residents with sensitive lungs.

Firefighters had doused the biggest flames, but city officials said they simply did not have the expertise or equipment to put out this type of fire, which is burning deep in the woodpile.

Emergency troubleshooters from state and federal agencies arrived early in the day to begin evaluating the fire, which started Saturday by spontaneous combustion.

Now city officials hope the state will stop the blaze at Archie Crippen Excavation, Nielsen and Marks avenues, in seven to 10 days.

The California Integrated Waste Management Board, which routinely handles situations like Fresno's fire, would hire a company to use huge land-moving

equipment and workers outfitted in special protective gear to pull the pile apart and put out the fire.

"This is a typical site, not unlike situations we've seen all over the place," said Todd Thalhamer, who will assess the fire today. "We're still in investigative mode at the moment, and no decision has been made on our involvement."

Air quality officials said particle monitoring stations register lower levels than they did Monday and Tuesday. But that didn't prevent the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District from asking residents not to burn in their fireplaces and to avoid outdoor exercise.

Fog and calm conditions make matters worse, said Evan Shipp, the district's supervising meteorologist.

"Things don't look good for dispersing the smoke," he said. "We know there's still smoke in the area."

So do residents who suffer lung problems.

A steady stream of patients complaining of tight chests, scratchy throats and burning eyes showed up this week at the urgent care and Children's Health Center at University Medical Center.

The 40 patients seen Monday were more than twice the normal number, said Kevin Hamilton, a Community Medical Centers respiratory therapist. The 29 patients treated Tuesday represented a 50% increase in the typical patient count.

"We saw more patients in one day than we saw in the three days before in the previous week," Hamilton said. "That's a pretty big hit for us."

In nearby Clovis, Loretta Baker is keeping a closer eye on grandson Robbie Baker, 10, since the fire started. Robbie has asthma and his lungs overreact to air pollutants.

"The last couple of days, his [ability to blow out air] is not as good as what it normally would be," Baker says.

Robbie likes to play basketball, but when Baker picked him up Wednesday at Freedom Elementary, he was inside a classroom. The local air district has advised teachers to keep students indoors.

Doctors won't know for several months the fire's impact on the public's health, said Dr. David Pepper, a family practitioner and medical director of the Asthma Education and Management program for Community Medical Centers.

"But we would expect with more particulates ..., we would expect there to be problems," he said.

Inhaling particles can aggravate conditions like bronchitis and asthma. But these microscopic particles carry hidden risks. They zip through the body's natural defenses in the nose and lungs, traveling deep inside, where they can damage air sacs.

The air sacs are where the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide occurs. Researchers speculate particles get into the blood through the air sacs. Once in the blood, they believe particles set into motion reactions in the body, including a slight constriction of the blood vessels.

A healthy person most likely wouldn't notice these small changes to the cardiovascular system. But scientists say heart damage from particles may be enough to trigger heart attacks in those with weak or already damaged hearts.

Research shows the risk of heart attacks for people with heart disease increases as airborne particle readings elevate.

City officials want to take the shortest route to reducing levels of particles. The options include allowing the fire to burn out over the next two months, smothering it with dirt over the next two to three weeks or pulling apart the pile and extinguishing the fire in seven to 10 days.

The last option would be the fastest.

The property owner, Archie Crippen, used his own equipment in an attempt to stop the fire four days ago. While trying to cut a fire line through the burning pile to stop the blaze from spreading, Crippen's bulldozer overturned, said Joel Aranaz, the interim Fresno fire chief.

Crippen, who refused to speak with the media Wednesday, has offered use of his bulldozers to help put out the blaze.

He faces possible fines of \$50,000 daily from the Valley air district. But officials said they would investigate the violations before contacting Crippen to discuss a possible fine.

But that isn't the only possible problem Crippen faces.

Nick Yovino, head of Fresno's development and planning department, said, once the fire is out, city inspectors will determine what was burning and whether Crippen violated his working permit. Yovino declined to talk about potential penalties Crippen could face from the city.

He also said he didn't know whether Crippen's huge pile of debris violated city codes. The growing pile escaped detection because city officials inspect only in response to complaints.

Crippen's property was annexed to the city in the mid-1980s. When it was annexed, Fresno officials honored Crippen's county permit to run a recycling operation, which crushed asphalt and concrete, and sold it to developers to build streets and parking lots.

In 1992, a city inspector said Crippen violated Fresno Municipal Code because excessive dust and rodents on the property were detrimental to public health and safety, city documents said. The inspector also noted tires, vehicles and other items on Crippen's property -- debris that was not allowed under his work permit.

City officials said Wednesday that the matter probably was resolved because there is no indication Crippen was penalized. The officials said there have been no other complaints filed against Crippen.

The reporters can be reached at mgrossi@fresnobee.com [<mailto:mgrossi@fresnobee.com>](mailto:mgrossi@fresnobee.com), banderson@fresnobee.com and plopez@fresnobee.com, or 441-6330.

ASTHMA STUDY

Children between the ages of 6 and 11 are needed for the Fresno Asthmatic Children's Environmental Study. Researchers are investigating how particulates and other air pollutants affect children's lungs. Details: Kathy Butler at (559) 294-6700.

Opinion

Up in smoke

Woodpile fire is a painful lesson in air quality consequences.

(Published Thursday, January 16, 2003, 4:25 AM), Fresno Bee

There is a slim silver lining in the filthy cloud of soot and ash still rising from a woodpile fire in southwest Fresno: We could not have a better demonstration of what happens when our fires mix with the Valley's winter fog. It's a vivid reminder, and a timely one, that all our human activities have consequences for the environment, and especially for our foul Valley air.

The microscopic particles spun into the air by the fire are a serious threat to human health. The tiny particles, called PM2.5 (particulate matter 2.5 microns wide), lodge in the lungs and can cause asthma attacks and other lung diseases, as well as heart problems.

Children, the elderly and those with sensitive lungs are at the greatest risk. That's why the Fresno Unified School District canceled sports and outdoor activities for the time being; exercise only exacerbates the invasive effects of the particles.

But even people with healthy lungs can be affected, which is one reason the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District pleaded with people not to light their fireplaces or otherwise add to the problem. That's about all the district can do -- plead. And not everyone gets the message.

The air district is studying a possible regionwide ban on building wood-burning fireplaces in new homes. The city of Fresno is pursuing the same goal. Both efforts should continue, and both should be expanded. All manner of outdoor burning -- including ag burns -- must be addressed and restricted.

To be sure, as critics of a fireplace ban have said, the amount of soot and ash fireplaces produce is only a fraction of the total. But in the wintertime it is a large fraction, 30% or so.

Diesel engines, for instance, are much worse. But that is not, as the critics sometimes seem to suggest, a reason to ignore fireplaces and other open air

burning. Each fraction of the problem we eliminate is a piece of the total we must achieve, and adding them one on top of the other can create impressive gains in this fight against Valley air pollution.

Taking small steps at first is how we learn to walk. We will need that practice, and that momentum, when we begin our run against the larger problems.

LASTGASP

"We can't go on living this way.

And we won't."

Another in a series of Thursday editorials on the Valley's air quality. Today: A vivid and frightening example of what we face.

Letters to the Editor

Making it clear

By Kevin Hall

Sierra Club-Tehipite Chapter, Transportation, Air Quality and Global Warming
Chair, Fresno

(Published Thursday, January 16, 2003, 4:26 AM), Fresno Bee

Rose Synn [letter Jan. 13] should know the Sierra Club supports an effective, Valleywide fireplace rule. I asked that the Fresno City Council pass a resolution supporting the strictest air district rule possible and wait to close loopholes with a tougher city ordinance.

It's likely the air district's rule won't apply to housing subdivisions approved under the existing rule. Hundreds of exempt homes could still be built with fireplaces in Fresno. A more stringent city rule could close that loophole. Pressure on the air district could close it Valleywide.

I suggested if the City Council wants to aggressively pursue clean air, it should review its new general plan's inadequacies. For example, the city has intentionally underestimated its road and freeway system's impact on air pollution by a full third.

Worse yet, the city's new growth areas at Copper River and Fancher Creek will place thousands of people into the dirtiest air in the nation. Will Council Member Henry T. Perea require his backers at the Building Industry Association to offer full disclosure of health risks to unsuspecting homebuyers?

No. Instead, the BIA intends to designate "clean air subdivisions," a deceptive title with potentially fatal consequences. I fear we'll see Council Member Perea cutting the ribbon.

As for the Fresno County Planning Commission, I press at every opportunity for healthy air but am often in the losing minority on important votes.

I hope the Sierra Club will remain a credible voice for Ms. Synn on air pollution and other important environmental issues. I apologize for any confusion.

'Help us get a grip'

By K.M. Anderson

Fresno

(Published Thursday, January 16, 2003, 4:26 AM), Fresno Bee

For the sake of cleaner air, let's ban 3-acre wood trash piles that can spontaneously combust and raise pollution to unhealthy levels for 12 to 15 days.

Meanwhile, we could pray for all of us to act as we can toward cleaner air. Prayer releases a power needed for this situation. May God help us get a grip on the dirty air catastrophe.

Unfair rule

By George Meyers

Fresno

(Published Thursday, January 16, 2003, 4:26 AM), Fresno Bee

Almost everyone agrees that air pollution is a regional issue that should be addressed by the Air Pollution Control District, which is considering the fireplace issue. The city of Fresno should not waste staff time and money passing an ordinance so some City Council members can claim that they are leaders.

The proponents of banning fireplace wood-burning raised it to crisis status, convincing parents that it is a major cause of asthma and other breathing problems. Since fireplace wood-burning occurs only three to four months of the year, what causes it the rest of the year? Fireplace wood-burning only causes about 2% of the particulate pollution annually; what about the other 98%? Diesel-powered cars, buses, trucks, construction and farm equipment do it all year long with little or no emissions control.

Why aren't we concentrating on the major causes of particulate pollution, such as diesel-powered vehicles? Do we continue to bow to political pressures and pass feel-good ordinances so we appear to be doing something effective? What

happened to fairness? I won't be able to use my fireplace insert, but trucks will continue to pass through the Valley spewing out their diesel soot and other pollutants. Anyone who drives a car or truck should not complain about fireplace wood-burning.

The people who use wood-burning as their only source of heat will be exempted from the ban. Is this because they don't cause pollution? How many homes do not have gas or electric service? Why not use these sources for heating? The rest of us do.

Missing the point

By Nora Quezada

Reedley

(Published Thursday, January 16, 2003, 4:26 AM), Fresno Bee

Your special report, "Last Gasp," was very informative and much needed. It should have captured the attention of our elected officials. However, I was disappointed to read that Fresno City Council Members Jerry Duncan and Brian Calhoun still don't see what has become obvious to everyone who lives in the Valley.

They were the only ones who voted against an ordinance to ban wood-burning fireplaces in new homes.

Council Member Duncan needs to understand that the community expects more of a leadership role from someone with the Duncan family name (which helped him get elected) during his tenure on the council.

Council Member Calhoun needs to understand that the novelty of his coffee stops and panhandling for votes has worn off, and it's time for him to see himself as a leader and not a candidate.

Smog-former emissions higher than once thought, officials said

The Associated Press

Thursday January 16, 2003, 04:20:08 AM

Bakersfield Californian

LOS ANGELES(AP) - Air quality officials signaled that they have underestimated smog-forming emissions and worry they will not be able to eliminate them in time to avoid penalties under the federal Clean Air Act.

Officials said Wednesday that it could take longer than 2010 to reduce ozone to levels required by federal law. Although measures have been taken to reduce air pollution across the state, it appears that progress against ozone and haze, two of the most abundant pollutants, is not as far along as hoped.

"It's grim. It's disheartening," said Jack Broadbent, director of air programs in California for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. "I'm not ready to give up, but we need to move as aggressively as possible. I have concern and alarm."

If mandatory targets are not met in the next seven years, about half of California's population would suffer longer than expected from the nation's dirtiest air. The pollutants common to Southern California are known to cause headaches, asthma, heart attacks and cancer.

The latest findings were contained in preliminary drafts of the 2003 air quality management plan released Tuesday. The plan, which is updated every few years

to reflect the latest research, is the blueprint that guides clean air efforts across the region.

Air quality officials now acknowledge that they have underestimated emissions from cars and trucks. Computer models show that vehicles produce about 30 percent more smog-forming emissions than once believed. Also producing more emissions than previously realized are hairspray, household cleaners and deodorant.

The miscalculations mean air quality officials are estimating an emissions reduction shortfall of about 145 tons of hydrocarbons and 90 tons of nitrogen oxides per day. Air quality officials concede they cannot identify enough strategies to eliminate so many emissions.

The 2003 clean air plan will be released in draft form at the end of January, beginning a long process of public hearings before it heads to the EPA.

Editorial: High-speed train in peril

The Bakersfield Californian

Wednesday January 15, 2003, 07:05:04 PM

One of the biggest follies in Gov. Gray Davis' proposed budget is folding the High Speed Rail Authority into the jurisdiction of the Department of Transportation (Caltrans.)

Facing a deficit of \$35 billion, the move would only save the state about \$1 million and basically kill any chance of a high-speed train becoming a reality in California any time soon.

The now-independent Rail Authority's nine-member board would continue to exist -- but in name only. The board would not have any staff of its own, depending instead on Caltrans to do the work.

This just wouldn't fly. A group of legislators, including Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter, has fired off a petition to the governor, protesting the proposal.

The legislators' two-page petition to the governor states their belief that the governor's plan to merge the Authority's staff and budget into Caltrans "is absolutely the wrong thing to do" and "would result in the death" of the high-speed train project.

They point out past failures of Caltrans in regional rail projects. This includes:

- * The 1981 Los Angeles-San Diego high-speed rail project. The petition states that "nothing happened until an independent body was created outside of Caltrans."
- * In the late 1970s, Caltrans was given the task of operating and improving the train service between San Jose and San Francisco. "It performed so poorly that the three counties formed a joint powers agency and took it over," the petition states, adding "service (then) improved and ridership has increased dramatically."
- * It continues: "The Capitol Corridor Service was given to Caltrans ... in the early 1990s. Caltrans did such a poor job that the service was deemed a failure and nearly stopped. Local entities stepped forward to run the service ... and today (it) is an outstanding success."

Since Caltrans' primary function and most of its budget are for highways, the legislators state that voters are not going to give Caltrans \$9 billion to build an ultramodern system.

The governor and Legislature last year approved a \$9.9 billion bond measure to start a high-speed rail system that must be approved by voters in November of 2004.

Most of that money would be used to help pay for the first leg of a 700-mile high-speed train that would run between the Bay area and Southern California through the San Joaquin Valley with a stop in Bakersfield.

Former Sen. Jim Costa, who was a main force in getting the bond measure on the ballot, has said: "California has a transportation problem. We're never going to be able to build enough highway lanes or runways to solve it. That's why we need high-speed rail."

A high-speed train would produce air quality and economic benefits in the Central Valley, which has been branded as having one of the dirtiest air basins in the country.

But the bond measure that would finance the train wouldn't have much chance of passage unless the governor drops his plans to have Caltrans run the system.

News in brief from the San Joaquin Valley

The Associated Press

Wednesday January 15, 2003, 05:40:09 PM

Bakersfield Californian

FRESNO, Calif.(AP) - Regional air quality regulators extended an advisory health warning in Fresno until Thursday after smoke from a woodpile fire caused unhealthy breathing conditions.

"At this point, it isn't as bad as it was earlier in the week, but it's unhealthy," said Janis B. Parker, a spokeswoman at the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Children in the Fresno Unified School District were kept indoors Tuesday and Wednesday. School officials also canceled outdoor sports, including baseball and track practice, which recently started. Soccer season also is now underway.

"When you can smell or taste the smoke in the air, you know it's bad," Fresno Unified spokeswoman Jill Marmolejo said.

Fresno Fire Chief Joel Aranaz said firefighters were still trying to determine how to douse the fire buried in about a 30-high pile of wood and other debris.

The fire started Saturday on a 3-acre plot owned by Archie Crippen Excavation, which collects wood from demolished homes to sell it for biofuel to power plants.

Air officials have issued a notice of violation to the company for improper handling of the material.

Business owners did not return a call for comment.