

Foam hastens work on pile fire

By Louis Galvan

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Standing in front of the stubborn woodpile blaze in southwest Fresno, Doug Hicks, a state forestry department division chief, liked what he saw.

The fog was gone, and a rainbow framed by a bright-blue sky arched over the pile. But that wasn't the view Hicks' reddened eyes enjoyed the most Tuesday afternoon.

It was the sight of heavy equipment on top of the 25-foot-high pile for the first time since the fire, caused by spontaneous combustion, broke out Jan. 11 at Archie Crippen Excavation near Marks and Nielsen avenues.

Now, instead of fighting the fire from the ground, "we can get on top and pick out the hot spots," said Hicks, who is based in Fresno County. Workers and equipment now can move safely at a faster pace, he said.

Two hours after firefighters started applying foam to the fire for the first time, Hicks, operations section chief at the scene, said it was "visually" apparent to him that the technique was working.

A small amount of foam mixed with water is designed not to smother the blaze, but to penetrate the pile, cool off hot spots and trap particulate matter.

Before the foam was introduced, an aerial truck was pumping 850 gallons of water per minute to cool off the hot spots and allow the bulldozers and backhoes to work on the pile. But because of the heat from the fires, Hicks said, the equipment and their operators could work only around the edges.

Once the foam was introduced, he said, the water flow was reduced to 500 gallons per minute. "This will be a great help in dealing with the waste water," he said.

Hicks said getting on top of the pile is critical because it will be easier for firefighters to find burning material on the expanse of refuse, which is about the size of a football field.

Janet Marshall, a spokeswoman for the state's Office of Emergency Services, said about 10% of the 5-acre site that is burning has been cleared and declared under control.

The cooling off of a section of the pile before equipment moves in is a matter of safety, Marshall said. "The steam coming out of those hot spots is very dangerous," she said.

Firefighters are working around the clock -- 20 during the day and six through the night. Also on hand is an eight-member crew from the Coast Guard's Pacific Strike Team in Novato, one of three Coast Guard teams nationwide assigned to help with the disposal of waste water.

Hicks and Mark Merchant, an EPA spokesman, both said they can't guess how long the fire will continue to burn. Merchant leaned toward earlier estimates of 10 days to two weeks.

Hicks said the foam will pick up the pace of fighting the fire, but it was too early to predict when it will be extinguished.

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Fire proves no fun for kids

Fresno Unified nurses see rise in respiratory problems, and youths forgo outdoor sports.

By Donald E. Coleman

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Nurses throughout Fresno Unified School District report a dramatic increase in respiratory problems among schoolchildren since a debris fire ignited in West Fresno 11 days ago.

At Jane Addams Elementary School, one of the closest to the smoldering woodpile, about 10% of the students have asthma, and visits to the school nurse have increased threefold, said Principal Teresa Calderon. Tuesday, children were again being kept inside.

About 124,000 children in the San Joaquin Valley and one in six children in Fresno County suffer with asthma.

The bad air lingering over the city prompted Fresno Unified to continue the cancellation of outdoor after-school sports and practices through midnight today, said Jill Marmolejo, a district spokeswoman.

"On Thursday, air quality will again be assessed in order to make a decision about outdoor activities," Marmolejo said.

At Addams school, about two miles northeast of the fire, Calderon was taking no chances. The students were on a "rainy day" schedule meaning no recess, no outdoor games and no outside after-school recreation programs.

"We have about 100 students with asthma and some severe," Calderon said. "When this started, some parents called and were concerned. We're going to make sure they're not exposed a lot."

The only outside exposure the students were getting Tuesday consisted of walks to the cafeteria, to the bus and when school was out.

"We received an e-mail from the district today that said if you can smell or see smoke, it's best to err on the side of the students and keep them inside," Calderon said.

Marmolejo said that across the district, nurses were reporting colds, sore throats, breathing problems and other related illnesses.

Jessie Moua, a worker with the Neighbor Resource Center at Addams, said most kindergarten students had a difficult time last week.

"They were covering their noses and their mouths," Moua said.

"The air hurts their lungs. It's not just the smoke, but the air was filled with paper and other things. We wanted them to shut the school down."

After the district confined students inside last week, the children got a break from the restrictions in the form of a three-day weekend because of the Martin Luther King holiday.

While students at Addams were being kept in on the first day back, they were shooting basketballs and playing at Lincoln Elementary in southwest Fresno and at Madison Elementary, about two miles southwest of the still-smoldering fire.

"They need to get out and release some energy," said Lincoln Principal Mike Jones. "They can go a day or two inside, but by the second or third day, their behavior oscillates."

Jones says the children don't understand the concept of a 'rainy day' schedule when it's not raining.

He said the district has granted them the discretion to let the kids out or to keep them inside.

"This is terrible," Jones said. "You usually think of 'Spare the Air Days' in the middle of summer, not in the middle of winter."

At Madison, in the Central Unified School District, Principal Peter Tozlian said children were kept inside last week, but school officials were told the conditions had abated somewhat.

Tozlian said teachers have lists of children with respiratory diseases and are prepared to have them go to the nurse's office at the first sign of trouble.

"We have not seen an increased number of referrals," to the nurse, Tozlian said. "We had a few parents call us, but we try to set their minds at ease as much as possible."

Marmolejo said while each of the district's schools has some discretion, that ends if they can see or smell the smoke.

"We're not going to jeopardize the children," she said. "All it takes is one time. What we're doing is for the better good of the children."

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Builders endorse ban on fireplaces

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One of Kern County's most consistent critics of development restrictions on Tuesday announced its full support for a plan that will virtually ban fireplaces in new homes, and some called it an important step toward mopping up the valley's filthy air.

The Building Industry Association of Kern County on Tuesday endorsed a plan by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District to restrict residential wood burning.

The plan, still in draft form, would establish mandatory no-burn nights based on weather conditions and require woodstoves to be removed when existing homes

are sold. It would also ban fireplaces and woodstoves in new homes except when development density is less than two homes per acre.

"We support it as written," said Brian Todd, executive vice president of the Kern County Building Industry Association. "A wood-burning fireplace is so obsolete. They're gross polluters, and it's not an issue of being able to heat the house. It's amazing that any are still being included with homes."

The building association traditionally has opposed regulations that limit growth and its impacts. Recent examples include opposition to a bigger traffic impact fee on new home building and a call for higher density development.

Bakersfield City Councilman Mike Maggard, a Kern County representative on the air district governing board, said the association's position on fireplaces marks an important change in thinking.

"It's a clear signal that we have a problem here, and we're making efforts to manage the problem," Maggard said. "This is just a great step on their part to do what they can to clean up the air."

Fireplaces and woodstoves are a leading source of particulate pollution in winter, especially when weather conditions trap smoke near the ground. Wood smoke aggravates a host of breathing troubles and contributes to asthma, bronchitis and emphysema. Soot particles from wood burning are so tiny that they penetrate deep into the lungs and can be absorbed directly into the bloodstream, potentially causing heart attacks.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency later this year is expected to issue new rules on this category of pollution. It is already expected the valley will violate these standards, and the air district is under pressure from the EPA to adopt new controls on wood burning.

"There was a little bit of concern last year about how industry would perceive the rule and whether they'd get behind it, so the building industry association getting on board is a real positive sign," said air district spokeswoman Kelly Hogan Malay.

Others say it was an easy move for the association because the new rules, if adopted, won't cost builders any money. In fact, said Kevin Hall, air quality chairman of the Sierra Club's Tehipite Chapter, it may even boost profits because gas-burning fire units are cheaper and easier to install than new masonry fireplaces.

"It's hard to lose here from their perspective," Hall said.

But Todd said the group's stance arises from a genuine concern about air quality. He said the problem hits home because his wife has chronic asthma. As a result, he hasn't used his own fireplace in two years.

"We hope that it helps the air district gain the momentum that it needs to get its governing board to adopt these rules," Todd said. "Wood smoke is just not healthy to breathe. That's really what this has come down to."

Tejon expansion gets board OK

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Bakersfield Californian

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Plans to build another 15 million square feet of industrial warehouses along Interstate 5 were approved Tuesday by county supervisors.

The board voted 4-0 to allow a 1,100-acre expansion of the Tejon Industrial Complex, adjacent to the interstate roughly 20 miles south of Bakersfield.

The complex already has 1.5 million square feet of space and permission to build another 3.5 million square feet.

Now, with the board's decision, the grand total could reach 20 million square feet. In comparison, the rest of southern Kern County -- including Bakersfield -- has just 24 million square feet of industrial space combined.

The complex, owned by Tejon Ranch Co., is now poised to become a massive warehouse hub for the entire state.

The vote went through despite calls for a delay to allow Supervisor Barbara Patrick to be present. At a recent meeting, Patrick said she was concerned "about what we are doing" in the Tejon area.

Environmental and smart growth groups protested the project Tuesday, saying more time is needed to study the potential impacts to air quality and wildlife. They repeatedly pleaded for the board to delay the project, but their concerns went unheeded.

"Kern County children already have some of the highest asthma rates in the nation," said Autumn Bernstein, a planner representing 15 environmental and planning groups throughout the state. "This will only make that worse."

The Tejon project is expected to add more than 8,600 additional vehicle trips during peak hours each weekday. Most would be from employees making the commute to work.

Bakersfield mother Barbara Evans complained about pollution from those trips, saying it is going to "stick in the lungs" of her four children. "I already have to keep them in during the afternoon because of unhealthy air," she said.

County planners said state law prohibits them from forcing Tejon to have employees carpool, thereby reducing the commuter driving. But supervisors argued Tuesday that the project has already made enough concessions to air quality. The latest concessions include limiting truck idling to 15 minutes, requiring propane or electric forklifts and requiring fleet vehicles to run on alternative fuels.

"I think the (concessions) here are precedent setting," said Supervisor Jon McQuiston.

Supervisor Ray Watson, whose district includes the project, argued that many of the polluting trucks are already rumbling through Kern County, bound for warehouses in other counties.

The supervisors also praised the Tejon project as a much-needed economic shot in the arm. The complex could add roughly 6,000 jobs, which could reduce the county's 12.5 percent unemployment by 2 percent, according to county officials.

The annual payroll for the complex could top \$500 million, according to Tejon officials.

"I for one salute Tejon and salute the businesses that are coming here," said Supervisor Pete Parra. "Five hundred million dollars. That will generate a lot of business activity."

Critics, however, complained the project was going to be an economic drain on the county, since it will require new fire and sheriff resources and other infrastructure costs.

But Tejon and county officials argued the project is already providing the county with a new fire station, sheriff substation, fire engine, land for a day care facility and has also promised to pay the cost for a round-the-clock firefighter.

Project critic Carolyn St. Claire argued that provisions found deep in the four inches of project documents show the deal isn't so good for the county. St. Claire noted that Tejon has dramatically increased the value of the land it plans to

donate to the county and that the company would only pay for the round-the-clock firefighter until property taxes reach certain levels.

The county will also be left to pay for road maintenance for the project, which is expected to bring in thousands of new truck trips, St. Claire said.

"They are really going to destroy our roads," she said. "This is going to cost the county plenty."

Other criticisms of the project were also rejected, including calls for the company to master plan its entire 270,000 acres of land in Kern and Los Angeles counties. To do so would cost "hundreds of millions of dollars," said Tejon President Robert Stine.

Stine also rejected accusations that Tejon has been a poor steward of its land, saying he has turned down potential developments that haven't been up to the company's standards.

"That's not what we are about," he said. "We want to be proud of anything we do. The last thing we want is to do something to some portion of our land that would degrade the value of our property."

It will likely take seven to 10 years for the expanded project to be fully developed, said Joe Drew, Tejon vice president. But, Drew said the company already has a possible buyer for 75 acres of industrial space in the expanded project.

"That's just a potential deal at this point," he said.

Officials: S.J. air quality unaffected by Fresno fire

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Valley air officials say a long-burning fire in Fresno won't mean breathing problems for San Joaquin County residents.

The debris fire at Archie Crippen Excavation prompted more than a week of health advisories in and around Fresno, warning residents to avoid outside activity. On Tuesday, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued a health warning, noting that Fresno residents living west of Highway 41 may be plagued with smokey skies.

Firefighters were attempting Tuesday to divide the fire into sections to make it easier to extinguish, said Janis Parker, an air-district spokeswoman. She said wood, concrete and metals were among the materials burning in the fire. The wood smoke includes carcinogens and particulate matter but no other toxins, she said.

San Joaquin County is downwind of the fire and should not experience any adverse air quality as a result of the blaze, Parker added.

The fire won't help the Valley's overall problem with particulate pollution, or tiny bits of dust, soot and vapor that fill Valley skies each winter. The Valley is considered one of the worst areas of the country for air pollution, and air regulators are expected this spring to finish a plan to deal with the pollution problem.

Fine particulate pollution, such as the soot in wood smoke, has been shown to cause heart attacks, cancer and breathing problems.