

Firefighters get on top of pile

New strategic position helps bring junk blaze 70% under control.

By Jennifer Fitzenberger

The Fresno Bee

(Published Monday, January 27, 2003, 7:30 AM)

Firefighters climbed a burning junk pile Sunday for the first time since it ignited more than two weeks ago.

From a makeshift road on the southwest Fresno heap, firefighters aimed jets of water with precision at smoldering chunks of rubble gouged by excavating equipment.

The technique speeds up the firefighting process, minimizes smoke and helps cut irritating airborne particles, said Cynthia Fanning, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"It's a more direct attack," said Janet Marshall, a spokeswoman for the governor's Office of Emergency Services, contrasting the ground operation with spraying water and foam from hoses atop firetruck ladders.

"We are able to get men and women on top of the pile."

About 70% of the fire was controlled Sunday. To date, the effort has cost \$836,000.

Air was unhealthful late last week thanks to stagnant weather, but it is getting better, said Josette Merced Bello, a spokeswoman with the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Today, air will be unhealthful for sensitive people.

"We got a bit of a break," Merced Bello said Sunday.

Firefighters built a road from extinguished debris Saturday. They also laid water-supply lines, including hoses that extend about 700 feet, into the center of the pile at Archie Crippen Excavation on Nielsen Avenue west of Marks Avenue.

Firefighters placed large pumps on the edges of the heap. Each pump pushes 4,000 gallons of water a minute -- enough to suck a firetruck dry in less than a minute or fill a large backyard pool in 10 minutes.

On Sunday, firefighters aimed the water with four nozzles, which create streams reaching up to 150 feet and walls of mist that protect firefighters from heat.

"As soon as they see something hot, the water is on it immediately," Marshall said. "It's closer and more precise."

Said Todd Thalhamer, an engineer with the state Integrated Waste Management Board: "It's something that had to be done to extinguish" the blaze.

Debris is doused with water and dumped into a pond, then moved away from the sizzling pile of wood chips, concrete, carpet, mattresses and automobile parts that ignited by spontaneous combustion.

Modesto Bee Editorial, January 27, 2003:

Solving valley's air problems requires sacrifice

One of the biggest causes of the valley's filthy atmosphere and one of the most intransigent obstacles in the path of cleaner air doesn't even show up on lists of pollution sources.

It is inertia, the powerful sum of all the indifference, denial and sloth that have characterized our attitude toward bad air for so long. We do the things we do because we have always done them that way, and we'd often rather go on doing them that way than make an effort to change, even when -- as is the case with our air -- that inertia can be fatal.

We'll have to remember this as the fight for clean air goes on. At every juncture, there will be the risk that each new action will be seen as the final piece, each new ordinance or regulation will be regarded as the last brick in the edifice of cleaner air.

That won't be true, but the impulse to congratulate ourselves will be strong. Politicians will preen and posture and claim most of the credit. Special interests will accept small restrictions on their activities when larger ones are needed, and loudly insist that we praise them for their sacrifices. We'll get used to walking to the nearby store, or riding a bike -- until the day when it's just too easy to slip behind the wheel of the car for the short trip. We can look for a useful model to the experience of people in the Los Angeles air basin, the nation's worst.

Change did not come easily, nor did it come quickly -- although the improvements already made in Los Angeles have been remarkable.

There, people resisted the warnings and the threats from the federal government with all the inertia they could summon, and it was considerable. They spent 15 years fighting off the Environmental Protection Agency before surrendering to the inevitable. But by surrendering, they won, and they continue to win.

Along the way they gave up much, and accepted many restrictions on the way they live their lives. Free parking went out the door for employees of large businesses. Mass transit was increased. Even such minutiae as the formulas for paint were affected. People's lives have changed in what seemed like dramatic ways at the time.

But it's working. The people of Los Angeles haven't had a smog alert in four years. They've gone from the butt of jokes to a leader other communities try to copy. They aren't all the way to where they need to be, but they're moving in that direction, and that's the path we want to follow.

One of the key ingredients will be constant pressure on ourselves and on our leaders. Inertia is the enemy, just as much as the ozone and the carbon monoxide. Vigilance is the weapon that will keep us going.

To that end, here's a specific suggestion. There is an air summit coming up April 23, called by Fresno Mayor Alan Autry and co-hosted by the EPA, among others. It will include elected leaders, business people, scientists, government regulators and advocates of all manner of solutions to our problem.

Show up, if you can. If you can't, let your council members or county supervisors know what you want and how you think we should get there. Let them know we expect more than sound bites and bumper-sticker solutions to emerge from this meeting.

And above all, let them know that we regard this as an ongoing battle, and not some tempest in a teapot. We understand that we will be called upon to make sacrifices.

We're in this for the long haul, and we expect the same from those who seek to lead us. We will not let their inertia -- or our own -- deflect us from this path.

Let them know. Start today.

Officials' tactics inflame critics

Questions arise over Fresno's slow response to fire.

By Mark Grossi

The Fresno Bee

(Published Sunday, January 26, 2003, 5:26 AM)

The e-mail doesn't mince words about the January junk fire still sending dangerous smoke into Fresno's sky.

"Waiting nine days to start a foam application is inexcusable and downright stupid ...," writes hazardous-materials officer Mark Cummins of Joshua, Texas. "You need to let a specialized ... company fight this fire."

People from as far away as Canada are speculating about the fire in southwest Fresno, thanks to news stories on the Internet. Intrigued and incensed, they think authorities aren't moving fast enough to stop the 2-week-old fire. Imagine what people in Fresno are saying.

"This should not be happening," says the Rev. Floyd Harris, chairman of the Southwest Fresno Neighborhood Watch. "I don't believe in excuses, I believe in accountability."

The smoke from the fire has resulted in a spike in respiratory patients at medical clinics, in schoolchildren being kept indoors and in residents cringing as the plume meanders through a region of 500,000 people. So why is this fire still burning? And why did it take so long to figure out how to fight it?

Authorities answer that the fire was difficult to diagnose in its first few days because it is submerged in a pile of debris as large as five football fields filled two stories high.

Crews are working around the clock, moving as quickly as safety allows, they say, but this is no house or forest fire. It resembles tentacles snaking capriciously through the pile, hunting for oxygen. It spews gases and steam. At night, it glows red, reaching 1,000 degrees in some spots.

"You don't just jump on a burning pile like this and start working," says state engineer Todd Thalhamer, an expert on dump and tire fires who is working on the Fresno blaze. "Yes, you want it out as fast as possible, but not at the expense of firefighters' health."

But criticism arises about other aspects of the firefighting effort.

One expert, a University of California professor, says the Fire Department's initial response -- pouring 1 million gallons of water on the fire -- probably was not appropriate. The water doused the visible flames, but it could have added moisture to the pile and stoked a chemical reaction already taking place.

"They needed to pull that fire apart right then," says Brian Jenkins, professor of biology and agricultural engineering at the University of California at Davis. "They should have been aware of this."

And there are other questions: Why did authorities wait four days after calling in state and federal authorities to start tearing the pile apart and putting out the fire?

Why did they receive 500 gallons of pollution-trapping foam concentrate on Jan. 14 and then not use it all? Why did they wait until Jan. 21 to use a different type of foam?

Indeed, what happened at that pile?

It begins Jan. 11 in the pile of demolished homes, concrete, brick, twisted metal, automobile parts and other junk at the Archie Crippen Excavation site near Nielsen and Marks avenues in southwest Fresno.

The Crippen fire starts by spontaneous combustion, a common cause that can seem mysterious. Spontaneous combustion is a two-step process of natural decomposition that releases energy, which becomes heat.

Moisture in a dry pile is required to start this process, and it probably came from the Valley's rain several weeks ago.

In the first step of spontaneous combustion, tiny creatures called microbes break down the wood, causing some heat to be released. The microbes die off or go dormant when the temperature reaches about 160 degrees.

Next, chemical oxidation -- think of iron rusting -- takes over and much more heat is released. As the temperature climbs, the oxidation speeds up. When the temperature reaches 300 degrees, the pile starts smoking.

If a burrowing rodent opens a hole or some other disturbance opens up the pile, oxygen will stir the smoldering pile into a blaze.

The Crippen pile becomes a blaze in the early hours of Jan. 11, a Saturday. City firefighters decide to drown the fire, pouring 1 million gallons of water on a small, flaming section that morning, says interim Fire Chief Joel Aranaz. When the flames die, firefighters depart, leaving Crippen's employees to separate the burned portion from the rest of the pile.

"I'm not going to second-guess the decision to put water on the fire," says Aranaz. "I know other people are questioning the decision. They have the luxury of doing that now. We had a fire to put out."

The water probably did not penetrate far into the pile, Aranaz says. But UC professor Jenkins says enough moisture could have seeped into the dry parts of the pile to speed up the processes of spontaneous combustion, making the fire spread.

Crippen's employees try to prevent the fire from spreading Jan. 11 and Jan. 12 by separating the burned portion. But they accidentally drive an excavating machine over a soft pocket or dome in the pile. The soft pocket collapses and the excavator turns on its side, Aranaz says, so the effort to separate the burned section could not be completed.

The fire flames back up and spreads. When fire crews return Jan. 12, Aranaz says, they stand watch over the fire, occasionally dousing flames. But they realize the fire is well-protected within the pile and that water can't penetrate deep enough to extinguish it.

"We didn't pour a lot more water on it because we decided we didn't want to turn it into a mud puddle, then have to bring in equipment to pull it apart," Aranaz says.

By Jan. 13, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which had investigated a smoke complaint over the weekend, has received many more complaints. People as far away as Clovis can smell the smoke, and two days later, people with lung problems are showing up at doctors' offices and medical clinics around the metropolitan area.

Air district officials on Jan. 13 issue a notice of violation to Crippen for not properly shifting the pile to prevent spontaneous combustion.

Crippen would later receive a second notice of violation for creating a public nuisance with the smoke. He eventually could be assessed a penalty of more than \$50,000 for each day the fire continues to affect the air. Crippen has refused to comment.

Air monitors reveal the Crippen fire had become a public health issue. With one monitor showing levels of particle pollution three times higher than the federal health standard, district officials warn the public to stay inside as much as possible.

The district also requests 300 to 500 gallons of foam concentrate from the U.S. Forest Service. About 500 gallons of foam, which would help hold down particle pollution and cool the fire, is delivered to the Crippen site on Tuesday, Jan. 14.

But by then, Aranaz had alerted Fresno County that the situation is beyond the control of local firefighters, setting in motion decisions that would prevent the foam from being used.

On Jan. 14, the county calls for help from the state's Integrated Waste Management Board. The state brings in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. On Jan. 15, state and federal officials warn that the foam concentrate from the U.S. Forest Service might contain chemicals that could cause toxic contamination when mixed with the Crippen pile.

"We didn't know what was in that pile," says EPA on-site coordinator Michelle Rogow. "And we needed to know what chemicals were in the foam."

The manufacturer of the foam would not release the names of key chemical ingredients, saying they were trade secrets. Rather than risk turning a stubborn fire into a toxic waste site, authorities decide not to use foam on the fire until a week later, when they obtain a different foam they are certain is safe.

Authorities say they needed time to size up the fire to justify an expensive assault with heavy equipment to pull the pile apart. Both Rogow and state engineer Thalhamer had seen bigger fires, but the Valley's well-publicized air quality problems make this one particularly troublesome. The Valley's air is among the worst in the nation.

By late in the day on Jan. 15, they know their involvement is warranted. But both would say later it takes two or three days to get the right equipment, provide training for city firefighters, set up the command structure for several agencies and adequately protect the lives of workers. They start with air samples.

"I had to get monitors in place Thursday morning to get samples so we could check the level of toxics," says Rogow. "We moved as fast as we could to take the samples and have them analyzed."

On Thursday afternoon, Jan. 16, Fresno officials announce the combined firefighting command under city, county and federal agencies, with the state providing expertise and funding.

On Jan. 17, work crews begin preparing the Crippen site, and the first of the bulldozers and mammoth excavators arrives.

Crews build a berm around a makeshift pond where firefighting water is collected and kept on the site. State water quality officials continue to monitor ground-water wells in the area for possible contamination.

On Saturday, Jan. 18, crews finally began pushing small chunks of the burning pile into the pond and extinguishing them.

That same day, Fresno Mayor Alan Autry comes to the site and says the city delivered progress reports to the neighbors in southwest Fresno. The report will become an issue in itself.

The Valley air district, which had not been invited to the gathering of city officials, arrives that day with 2,500 fliers that warn neighbors of the fire's health effects. Two thousand of the fliers are printed in English and Spanish, and 500 more in Hmong.

The district printed the fliers at the request of Sierra Club member Kevin Hall.

"The city's flier was in English only," Hall says. "It said nothing about health. It was shocking."

Hall says he joined others to deliver the fliers to about 30 churches on Sunday, Jan. 19. At one church, people did not know about the fire because they do not speak English and do not follow mainstream media, Hall says.

City officials that day say they plan to tell people about the health risks at a town hall meeting later in the week. They also welcome the news from EPA's Rogow about the results of the air analysis, which shows the toxic content of the fire's pollution was not high enough to trigger health problems.

On Jan. 20, the EPA, the air district and others quickly remind the media and the public that wood smoke contains many pollutants, not just toxics, and is still dangerous for those exposed to it.

City officials hold their town hall meeting Thursday, explaining health risks, describing the efforts to put out the fire and listening to residents' comments.

Residents vent some frustration. "This information here is not new for me because I've been through this already," says Lupe Avila, 71. "I'm limited with what I can do now. It's hard to breathe."

City officials tell residents there would be an investigation of the Crippen fire and the city permit system that might have prevented it. Residents have complained in the past about Crippen and other recyclers in the area.

Officials reiterate the mayor's pledge to form a special task force.

"We have no fear of the truth," Autry says via telephone link to the residents at the town hall meeting. Autry was in Washington, D.C., for a mayors' conference.

On Saturday, back at the Crippen property, crews continue to dig out burning debris under clouds of smoke. Authorities say the state's cost of fighting the fire has reached \$795,000. They describe the blaze as slightly more than halfway under control.

But they say they still can't answer the most crucial question: When will this fire end?

Woman quits air advisory committee

By MATT WEISER, Californian staff writer

e-mail: mweiser@bakersfield.com

Saturday January 25, 2003, 09:41:41 PM

Bakersfield Californian

For most people, air pollution and poetry would seem to have little in common. But for Ann Williams, they are intimately linked.

A Bakersfield resident for 58 years, Williams recently resigned from her seat on the citizens advisory committee to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. After a year on the committee, she said she felt powerless to affect any improvement in the valley's unhealthy air and disillusioned by a political process she believes continues to hold the door open for polluters.

As an aspiring poet, she also finds it difficult to write under smoggy skies.

"The most important thing to a poet is light. There has to be light and we rarely have real light here," said Williams, 68.

"How long will my vision be good? As long as it is, it has to be feasted on beauty. It has to be able to see a horizon. I've got to see that as much as I can and I've got to not be smelling this stuff all the time."

Williams got interested in writing poetry after retiring as an English teacher from Bakersfield High School in 1995. She plans to spend more time traveling to places with pure light, "where the air is more healthful," as she said in her December resignation letter to the Kern County Board of Supervisors.

"I increasingly feel the citizens advisory committee has existed mostly to give the appearance of citizen involvement," she said. "I'm not going to go anymore and plead for things that are not going to happen."

Supervisor Barbara Patrick appointed Williams as a representative of Kern County's environmental community, and believes it is still an effective body.

Patrick said she was disappointed by Williams' resignation, and said Williams may misunderstand the committee's purpose.

"The purpose of the group is to disseminate information back to the community," said Patrick, one of two Kern County representatives on the air district governing board. "But it is not their role to then pass judgment, if you will, on what the air district is doing and then make recommendations to our governing board."

The citizens advisory committee is a little-known entity composed of representatives from each of three groups: industry/agriculture, environmentalists and government. Each of the eight counties in the air district appoints a primary and an alternate member in each category, for a total of 48 members. Its monthly meetings are open to the public.

"They don't actually set policy or take action on specific rules and policies," said district spokeswoman Josette Merced Bello. "They work more hands-on with the staff than the governing board. Their function is more to provide input and guidance to staff and make recommendations to the governing board."

The air district's own Web site says the committee's purpose is to "advise the district governing board on air quality matters," including "suggesting changes and participating in the rule development process."

Committee Chairman Lee Smith said the committee has drifted away from this role in recent years, hinting at some of Williams' frustration. Part of the problem may be that the committee has no formal advisory role, as a planning commission does in reviewing projects for a board of supervisors. It doesn't hold hearings or take testimony. Members also face a steep learning curve on highly technical legal and scientific matters.

"Lately, we haven't provided the amount of input that we should," said Smith, an attorney appointed from Madera County.

"We're trying to make an effort to return to that role. But given the speed at which things come up, and the deadlines the district is faced with, it's difficult for us to try and get ahead of that curve."

Williams remembers being able to look out her bedroom window as a child and see the Sierra Nevada. That's rarely possible now.

In her many years as a local teacher, she said she knew hundreds of children who suffered allergies, breathing difficulties and worse as a result of the declining air quality that has extinguished the stars at night and smudged out the county's sublime scenery during the day.

"If you live at the foot of a mighty range of mountains and you can't see it, you're in trouble not only physically but aesthetically. It's a kind of aesthetic death," said Williams.

"I guess the main thing that disturbs me is that this is not necessary. It never had to be this way. It doesn't have to be this way."

She attributes the decline to an obsessive focus on job creation and economics that has steamrolled public health.

She said more must be done to control pollution, no matter the cost.

"Part of what the district struggles with is the balance between public health issues and the economy," Smith acknowledged.

Williams is not one to cast blame. Though she represented the environmental community on the committee, her background is pure Bakersfield: Her father was a petroleum engineer who built refineries all over the world. "Oil sent me to college," she said.

She did not intend her resignation to send a message, but if people take it that way, she hopes they hear this:

"I'd like to see more vigilance. I would like people to face their legislators and demand the air be cleaner for their children. I think the bottom line should be public health."

Letter to the Editor, Modesto Bee, January 27, 2003

Pombo no guardian of the environment

BRAD BARKER

Even a casual look at Congressman Richard Pombo's record raises serious doubts about his qualifications to be a trusted steward of public lands.

Pombo, R-Tracy, was selected chairman of the House Resources Committee. While we're inclined to root for valley folks who rise to leadership positions in Washington, Pombo's extreme anti-environment positions are an embarrassment for our region and a disaster for the country.

Can anyone explain how some conservatives become so aligned with destructive environmental policies? Do "family values" include the unregulated use of pesticides and chemicals? Is it really conservative to deny scientific evidence of global warming? Is it fiscally responsible to enable corporate interests to plunder public lands?

Pombo's record shows an overriding advocacy for corporations that drill for oil, harvest timber, extract minerals, generate electricity and manufacture millions of tons of pesticides. In 1995, the U.S. Public Interest Research Group named Pombo a "House Zero" for taking polluter PAC contributions while voting in their favor. In January 1996, the Sierra Club named Pombo "Eco-thug" of the month for consistently voting to weaken laws protecting air quality, water quality and endangered wildlife. The article noted substantial campaign contributions from developers and corporations who benefit from his votes. And, the Earth Island Journal named Pombo one of "Washington's Top Ten Worst Environmentalists."

Specific complaints about Pombo include:

In 1999, Pombo introduced HR 1592, which would have stripped the Food Quality Protection Act of key provisions to regulate widely used chemicals. In 2000, The Washington Post reported that Pombo's bill had been written by a pesticide industry lobbyist to circumvent FQPA laws designed to protect children. Pombo received \$23,000 in contributions from related industries. Isn't this a potential ethics violation?

In 1999, The Fresno Bee reported that Pombo "yanked" the American River in Northern California from the American Heritage Rivers Initiative. The report

claimed that objections to the initiative were part of a "radical right-wing" ideology, a belief that policy-makers should "let private special interests exploit public resources" as long as "they keep making campaign contributions.

In 2002, Pombo promoted clear-cutting as a solution to forest fires. (Let's stipulate that lands stripped bare by clear-cutting rarely catch fire.)

In the mid-1990s, Pombo introduced HR 2275 to eviscerate the Endangered Species Act. The bill was so extreme that Newt Gingrich refused to bring it to the House floor.

In 1994, while taking contributions from the Monsanto Corp., Pombo helped to kill a bill that would require labeling on dairy products containing bovine growth hormones (made by Monsanto).

Does this favorite son of developers and corporate polluters deserve a leadership position overseeing America's public lands? Richard Pombo as the new resources chairman is the moral equivalent of Col. Sanders guarding the henhouse. Our nation's natural heritage is about to be plucked and deep-fried. Barker is the librarian at Mark Twain Junior High School in Modesto.

Turning waste to energy

By MICHAEL G. MOONEYBEE, MODESTO STAFF WRITER, January 26, 2003

Modestans and their Stanislaus County neighbors will breathe easier if Jocelyn Reed is right.

Reed, solid waste manager for Modesto, is pushing a plan to produce energy from cow manure and ethanol from food processing and other agricultural wastes.

"It's an intriguing project," Reed said Thursday. "The beauty of this is we could create a new energy industry here while doing a lot to meet a whole host of environmental issues."

Methane captured from cow manure, Reed said, could be used to generate electricity at a specially designed facility that would be used to clean wastewater food processors create.

The manure releases methane gas into the atmosphere. Methane is an air pollutant and precursor to smog; it also can cause water pollution.

In addition, Reed said, ag waste materials such as peach pits, fruit skins and the like could be turned into ethanol, which burns more cleanly than petroleum-based fuels such as gasoline.

Reed said agriculture in the county produces about 400,000 tons of waste a year. Much of that is burned, a practice the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District wants to ban.

The thinking now, Reed said, would be to build a methane-to-energy plant outside a cannery. The facility could be used to clean the cannery's wastewater and then recycle it into the plant for cleaning and other uses. Reed said such a system would halt discharges of polluted water and also reduce the cannery's dependence on fresh water supplies.

The U.S. Department of Energy, Reed said, already has recognized Modesto as a potential hub for methanol production in the Northern San Joaquin Valley.

Now all Reed and a group of agribusiness, civic and community leaders have to do is convince those who control the federal purse strings.

Reed said the city is seeking about \$200,000 in federal money to fund studies on the ideas. During the next two months, she said, city lobbyists will go to the nation's capital in search of money.

In addition to the Energy Department, the Modesto plan is to be shared with the Department of Agriculture, as well as the Environmental Protection Agency and the Bureau of Reclamation.

The Modesto City Council signed off on the plan last summer.

Without finding alternative uses for agricultural wastes, and assuming open burning eventually is banned, the city and county will be forced to expand its landfill.

Expanding the garbage-burning plant to handle that ever-increasing volume of waste would cost \$50 million or more to meet tough air-quality regulations.

Delano gives trees to residents

By BRYAN SWAIM, Californian correspondent
Friday January 24, 2003, 10:16:59 PM
Bakersfield Californian

Delano has trees, lots of them, and it wants to give them away.

The Delano Community Services Department bought 4,500 trees with a \$250,000 state grant it received last year. And has been trying to give them away ever since.

It's part of a program to increase the city's tree canopy in an effort to help clear the smoggy air.

"This has been a great thing for the city," said Community Services Director Philip E. Newhouse.

The city began giving away the 15-gallon trees last year and has planted around 600 in two phased giveaways. Because of little advertising, the turnout for this third giveaway wasn't what officials expected.

"It has been a light turnout so far," said Newhouse. "Most of it has been word-of-mouth, people seeing their next-door neighbor getting one. But it's picking up momentum."

There are six varieties of trees available: Chinese pistache, peppermint eucalyptus, male Ginkgo biloba, Pyres Caller Ana Reedsport pear, Chinese tallow and Little Leaf Linden "Greenspire." The most popular tree is the eucalyptus, which is also the most widely planted non-native tree in California.

"The new high school just picked up 40 -- all at no cost to the organization. We just have to plant them," said Newhouse.

Newhouse said the city plans to target Arbor Day in April for another mass planting.

"That event last year brought out 50 to 55 people. We didn't lose one tree," he said.

Community Services got the grant last year and has access to the money until Dec. 31.

The city plans to continue having giveaways until all the trees are gone.

Literature and pictures are available for everyone who signs up to receive a tree. The deadline to sign up is noon on Feb. 6 at noon at the department.

All those seeking a free tree must bring proof of residency and sign a form agreeing the tree will be planted within 10 feet of their home's street curb.

Trees will be given out on Feb. 14 and the Community Services department will give instructions on how to plant them. The Delano Community Services Department is at 925 Ellington St. For more information call 721-3335.

Tejon: Reveal ranch plan

The Bakersfield Californian Editorial
Saturday January 25, 2003, 04:35:04 PM

Maybe it would be unreasonable to tell Tejon Ranch that it cannot develop any of its 270,000 acres until it prepares a master plan. But it is equally unreasonable to not require the landowner to at least reveal a larger share of its development proposals in advance.

Only a small portion of Tejon Ranch spills into Los Angeles County, where a 23,000-home development has been approved. The bulk of the holdings are in Kern County, where supervisors and planning commissioners so far have approved development on a project-by-project basis.

Most recently, Kern County officials approved the expansion of Tejon's industrial park at the foot of the Grapevine. They approved the ranch's plans to add millions of square feet of space to a warehouse complex that already contains millions of square feet of space.

Approval came over the objections of individuals and groups who fear the leapfrog development will stretch already stretched government dollars to provide services, such as law enforcement, fire protection and transportation.

They complain that the project and future development will consume prime agricultural land a commodity Californians and their legislators believe must be preserved.

They also fear the project will further pollute the valley's already polluted air, as workers drive from Bakersfield, Arvin, Taft and over the Grapevine to their jobs in the warehouses. Air pollution will be increased by the volume of trucks driving to and from the complex with their loads, they contend.

Logic tells us that soon to follow will be homes and commercial services to support the industrial complex. It's beginning to sound like a "new town," which might not be a bad thing, but it's something that should be considered as part of a bigger plan.

Critics contend a master plan would consider the cumulative effects of developing Tejon Ranch. Piece-by-piece approval fails to consider the big picture and the big impacts.

Joe Drew, Kern County's former county administrative officer, who now works for Tejon, contends a master plan wouldn't be very useful.

If you were building out Los Angeles, you wouldn't hold up all development until you knew how the whole city was going to be built, would you?" Drew told The Californian.

That may be true, but cities by state law are required to have general plans, which are blueprints that plot out where and what development is to occur. These plans can be changed periodically, but it gives some place to start.

Drew also noted other property owners aren't required to provide master plans for all of their land when developing only a part of it.

That may be true, but consider the Kern County Land Co. property that was sold to Tenneco Corp. about three decades ago. A master plan was prepared for this huge landholding, which is now southwest Bakersfield.

Not only was a master plan a reasonable part of development, it made good business sense.

A well-run corporation, such as Tejon Ranch, and its competent administrators have plans for development.

It is time they shared those plans with the residents of Kern County maybe not all their plans, but certainly enough to allow the accumulative effects of development to be assessed and assurances to be made that Kern County taxpayers will not be burdened by the costs.

Fire's risks

Letter to the Editor, Fresno Bee

By Adriana Dermenjian

Fresno

(Published Monday, January 27, 2003, 5:15 AM)

The story about the fire that has been going on in Fresno, "Smoky air still risk to health," was very informative. Although I was aware of the fire in Fresno, I was not familiar with the details and risks it can cause to the people in Fresno.

This fire could have been prevented. However, now that it has already occurred, we must try to extinguish it immediately before more damage is done to the area and the people in the area.

Breathing Easier

Smoke lets up as woodpile fire in Fresno is about 50% controlled.

By Louis Galvan

The Fresno Bee

(Published Saturday, January 25, 2003, 4:23 AM)

Fire crews battling the 2-week-old woodpile blaze in southwest Fresno were reported about halfway through the mess Friday, but some nearby residents didn't have to be told about the progress.

"You can tell the smoke is not as bad as it was two or three days ago," said Paul Sanchez, 37. "The smell is not as bad, and you can breathe the air again."

A few days ago, however, the stench from the smoke was so bad no one spent too much time outdoors, he said.

"It smelled like railroad ties were burning," Sanchez said, wrinkling his nose.

Chris Burton, 29, a neighbor who suffers from asthma, agreed. "I hadn't been able to go outside much," he said, enjoying the "fresh air" from his front yard.

The two men live in an area known as Parkside, just off Belmont Avenue and south of Roeding Park and west of Freeway 99.

Their homes are less than two miles west and downwind of the smoldering fire at Archie Crippen Excavation at Marks and Nielsen avenues.

The fire, caused by spontaneous combustion, broke out Jan. 11, unleashing almost immediate health and environmental concerns among some residents and government agencies.

Another neighbor, Elsa Hernandez, 31, who is eight months' pregnant, came down with sinus problems a few days after the fire started and her doctor advised her to stay indoors after the doctor learned she was being exposed to smoke and fallout.

Hernandez, who has an active 5-year-old daughter, has found staying indoors hard to do.

A few blocks away, Pete Medellin, 78, stopped mowing his front yard long enough to say he thought people were making too much of the fire. Yes, he was sure some have become sick because of the smoke, but he didn't think the situation was critical.

Medellin, a retired construction worker, said he worked for more than 20 years in worse conditions, including handling hot asphalt.

"This smoke hasn't bothered me," he said, starting up his lawn mower again.

Maria Hernandez Garcia and her mother, Marcelina Garcia, said they were neither aware of the fire nor of any of the health concerns.

"We don't know how to read," the daughter said in Spanish. "We watch television, but we don't pay attention to the news."

Of course, they have noticed the smell of smoke, but they thought the odor was gas fumes from traffic on nearby Freeway 99, the mother said.

"So what's all the fuss about?" the daughter wanted to know.

Bill Shelton, 62, knows what the fuss is about.

Shelton, who suffers from emphysema linked to years of cigarette smoking and welding, said the bad air has made him a prisoner in his home since the fire broke out.

Shelton lives in a small trailer park on Belmont Avenue about two blocks from the fire, which is visible from his front door.

"I'm afraid to go out," he said. "It's gotten real rough for me to breathe."

Shelton, who uses a nebulizer to treat his emphysema, said he has been forced to increase his treatments from an average of three times daily to about six.

That means he runs out of medication more quickly, so it's costing him more to maintain the medicine he needs.

"I'm glad they're getting a good handle on that fire," he said. "Like I said, it's been rough."

Janet Marshall, an on-site spokeswoman for the Governor's Office of Emergency Services, said the fire, which is spread out over 4.8 acres in a two-story-high mountain of wood, concrete, asphalt, metal, brick, sheet rock and other materials, was about 50% under control.

No one at the site, however, will say when the operation is expected to be completed.

A shipment of more than 700 gallons of foam concentrate, which was expected to arrive Friday from Atlanta, arrived on time and more has been ordered. Firefighters mix the concentrate with water.

Two aerial fire rigs are each pumping 500 gallons of water per minute into the blaze. Two bulldozers and two excavators are breaking up the pile and clearing the field of the burning materials.

The water being used in the operation is being pumped by a Coast Guard team trained in the disposal of waste water. The water is being stored in five portable tanks, each capable of holding 21,000 gallons, said Doug Hicks, a division chief with the California Department of Forestry-Fresno County Fire Department. As of noon Friday, about 40,000 gallons of the waste water had been pumped into the tanks.

The Coast Guard will test the water to determine whether it can be treated and reused for the fire suppression. If it can't be reused, the water will be transported to a waste site.

Hydrogen isn't yet the miracle fuel of the future

Fresno Bee

By George Burman

(Published Saturday, January 25, 2003, 4:00 AM)

There is little doubt that Earth's climate is getting warmer. How much is due to human production of carbon dioxide and how much is due to a natural warming cycle is not certain. What can be shown, however, is that carbon dioxide emissions from internal combustion engines do contribute to global warming.

There has been much interest in the use of hydrogen as a fuel to relieve our dependence on petroleum and to eliminate carbon dioxide as a byproduct. Does hydrogen really offer this promise?

The most promising technology to use hydrogen as an energy source for automotive applications is the fuel cell. Simply put, a fuel cell combines hydrogen with oxygen, producing electricity with water as a byproduct. So far, this sounds like the perfect answer: no carbon dioxide emissions. To see if this really is the case, we have to look further than just what goes into a fuel cell and what comes out. We have to look at how we produce the fuel for the fuel cell.

The easy part is oxygen. Oxygen makes up about 20% of our atmosphere, and fuel cells can be easily designed to use atmospheric oxygen.

Next comes hydrogen, and there's the rub. First, we need to understand that hydrogen isn't really a fuel, in the sense that a "fuel" is understood to be a substance that requires less energy to manufacture than it gives off when used. Gasoline, diesel and natural gas meet this definition; hydrogen doesn't.

About 1,600 joules of energy are required to produce an amount of hydrogen that will yield 1,000 joules. In contrast, to manufacture a quantity of gasoline that will produce 1,000 joules of energy only 167 joules are required. Rather than

classifying hydrogen as a "fuel," we are limited, with today's technology, to labeling hydrogen as a rather inefficient energy-transfer medium.

Two choices

There are, at present, two methods for producing hydrogen. One is electrolysis of water. You need a source of water and a supply of electrical energy. Producing hydrogen in the quantities needed for large-scale transportation applications requires lots of water and lots of electricity. In California, we know that neither of these is plentiful nor inexpensive.

Furthermore, more than 90% of the electricity produced in the United States is generated by fossil fuel (gas, oil, coal) plants that emit carbon dioxide just like automobiles. Other sources of electrical energy, hydro and nuclear generation, are limited by geography or are politically unattractive. Some technologies, like wind and solar generation, are attractive but require huge capital investment and large parcels of land.

The second method of hydrogen production is reforming, where a hydrocarbon, such as methane (natural gas) or some other petroleum product is mixed with water and heated. Out comes hydrogen and, just like an automobile engine, carbon dioxide.

Reforming and electrolysis produce hydrogen, but we can't call hydrogen a fuel since these processes are only 60% to 65% efficient. Not all hydrogen production eliminates carbon dioxide as a byproduct. Either of these methods will use more petroleum even if we make a wholesale change to hydrogen-powered vehicles. An analysis reported in the November issue of the journal *Physics Today* explains this as follows: there are approximately 132 million cars in the United States (as of 1999). These cars use 73.2 billion gallons of gasoline annually. To produce an equivalent quantity of hydrogen by the reforming process would require 92 billion gallons of gasoline (or its equivalent in other hydrocarbons). To produce that same amount of hydrogen by electrolysis would require, annually, the generation of 5 billion megawatt-hours of electrical energy. At present, the annual generating capacity of all the generators in the United States is 3.68 billion megawatt-hours. More generators and more fossil fuel will be required.

With this in mind, let's go back to the original question. Do hydrogen and fuel cell technology really offer promise as a replacement for petroleum fuels? Apparently, the answer right now is no.

I do not advocate our continued gluttony of petroleum fuels, but unless a way can be found to produce hydrogen economically and without the concomitant production of carbon dioxide, we cannot simply say: "Let's use hydrogen, it's clean, cheap and is the fuel of the future."

Until we can make that statement, we have no choice but to develop more efficient and cleaner transportation technology, such as hybrid vehicles and mass transportation that rely, directly or indirectly, on petroleum as the energy source.

George Burman of Madera, who is now retired, was an electrical engineer and a teacher of physics and chemistry.

Fresno residents fear fire fallout

Despite assurances of safety, angry residents voice concern at forum.

By Matt Leedy and Louis Galvan

The Fresno Bee

(Published Friday, January 24, 2003, 8:18 AM)

Southwest Fresno families who say they have stayed home with sick children since a massive woodpile fire started almost two weeks ago took little comfort Thursday from government officials' assurances that the flames and smoke are being controlled.

More than 100 people attended a town hall meeting Thursday evening at Fresno City Hall to discuss their concerns about the fire sparked Jan. 11 at Archie Crippen Excavation in southwest Fresno.

"I'm up all night watching my kids, making sure they're breathing," said the Rev. Floyd Harris Jr., who believes too many wrecking yards, landfills and recycling plants have been allowed into southwest Fresno.

"You like to say Fresno is an All-American city. You need to treat west Fresno like it's part of an All-American city," Harris told a panel of officials from local, state and federal agencies.

"Whatever you don't want in north Fresno is put in west Fresno. I don't believe this would have happened if it was on Herndon Avenue, if this was on Van Ness extension."

Mayor Alan Autry, who is in Washington D.C. this week attending the annual U.S. Conference of Mayors winter meeting, told the crowd via speaker phone that city firefighters responded promptly to a blaze that is unlike any they've seen before.

"We as a city I think acted very, very quickly," Autry said. "We have never had a situation like this before. This is a complex fire."

However, Autry and City Council members did little to quell the fears Mary Ochoa has for her four children.

Three members of Ochoa's family have been to their doctor to have congested

lungs cleared, she said.

Her 13-year-old son, Albert, has been forced to use his inhaler every day since the fire started. Her 8-year-old son, Marky, doesn't go outside anymore. He wears sunglasses to cover inflamed skin around his eyes.

Soot has settled on the family's tables and their humidifier is filled with gray material that looks like thick dust.

"I'm concerned about my children's eyes and their congestion," Ochoa said. "No one here is putting me at ease."

Residents were told by county health officials who attended the forum that it did not appear there are any significant long-term health effects from the fire.

"Conditions on the site have greatly improved," City Manager Dan Hobbs said of the fire buried in a mound of wood and refuse the size of a football field and two stories high.

There are several pockets in the 4.8-acre pile where the fire is burning that "belch black smoke" once they've been uncovered, said Doug Hicks, a state forestry department division chief.

"That's going to happen every time we hit a deep-seated area."

Southwest Fresno neighbors said they're all too familiar with the plumes of smoke.

"This information here is not new for me because I've been through this already," said Lupe Avila, 71, who fought back tears as she spoke to the panel. "I'm limited with what I can do now. It's hard to breathe. We can't be confined to the house all day long."

Avila and others who live near the fire were told a task force will be looking into their complaints.

"We want to make sure we reassure you we are doing everything possible to get the community back on track," said Fresno City Council Member Cynthia Sterling, who is leading the task force.

The cost of fighting the fire is nearing \$600,000, said Janet Marshall, a spokeswoman for Gov. Davis' Office of Emergency Services.

Marshall said the cost estimate includes personnel, equipment, supplies and logistical support.

The final cost hinges on how long it takes to put the fire out.

About one-third of the blaze has been declared under control, she said.

A force of more than 60 people -- including two dozen firefighters from about a half-dozen federal, state and local agencies and the private sector -- is combating the blaze.

Foam used to fight the fire was expected to run out Thursday, and the next big shipment wasn't scheduled to arrive until today. However, the Sanger Fire Department gave 200 gallons of foam and the Kings County Fire Department added 150 gallons more to help.

A representative from the Williams Fire & Hazard Control Inc., a Texas-based company that specializes in putting out oil and gas fires, was at the fire site Thursday.

Reportedly invited by EPA officials, Williams Fire is internationally known. A Williams Fire crew worked on the Stanislaus County tire fire near Westley, west of Modesto, which broke out in September 1999 when lightning struck a pile of 7 million tires.

In other developments:

The Fresno County Board of Supervisors and Fresno City Council unanimously approved resolutions proclaiming the woodpile fire a local emergency and requesting the governor to declare it a state emergency.

The action opens the door to ensure specific liability protection and potential recovery of eligible costs, if any, from state and federal emergency funds.

The San Joaquin Valley Unified Air Pollution Control District issued a warning to Fresno and Clovis residents to remain cautious when outdoors, through the end of the weekend.

As the woodpile fire is extinguished and begins to cool, there is concern that unhealthful particles will remain closer to the ground, according to the district.

"There may be reduced overall particulate matter (PM) emissions as the fire is extinguished," said Evan Shipp, air district meteorologist. "However, as the fire cools, we are seeing the smoke plume settling closer to the ground at the site. Particulates are not being dispersed into the upper atmosphere as effectively as earlier this week."

Shipp said a strengthening high-pressure ridge also is being forecast for the weekend, which would further deteriorate dispersion conditions.

The district expects air quality to be in the unhealthy range for the Valley's central region through Sunday, with some areas being more adversely affected by fire emissions.

"We are seeing somewhat elevated PM levels at monitoring sites. Some of these readings are normal given the type of weather we are having. But some spikes recorded for short periods appear to be influenced by the fire," Shipp said.

"People need to continue to be aware of conditions in their location."

The air district also urged residents in the Valley to avoid the use of wood-burning fireplaces, stoves and inserts beginning Thursday evening through 4 p.m. Monday.

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