

2nd load of foam due Friday

Crews run low on the additive that speeds work on the woodpile, a site that poses special challenges to firefighters.

By Louis Galvan, The Fresno Bee, January 23, 2003

Nearly 700 gallons of foam concentrate directed at southwest Fresno's woodpile fire was expected to run out this afternoon, but a larger shipment is expected by Friday.

That was the word Wednesday from officials monitoring the huge, smoldering blaze at Archie Crippen Excavation near Marks and Nielsen avenues. The fire broke out Jan. 11 at the two-story-high, football field-size mound, sparking health and environmental concerns among residents and government agencies.

The first shipment of foam arrived Monday night, and firefighters began using it Tuesday afternoon, adding only a fraction of it to every gallon of water being sprayed -- 500 gallons per minute -- on the blaze.

Another shipment of more than 700 gallons has been ordered from Atlanta, said Janet Marshall, a spokeswoman for the Governor's Office of Emergency Services.

The foam-water mix is designed to penetrate the burning debris and help cool the hot spots, allowing giant excavators and bulldozers to work atop the pile and break it up at a faster pace.

The foam also helps trap particulate matter, a source of major concern to health and air-quality experts.

Todd Thalhamer, an Integrated Waste Management Board engineer assigned to help oversee the operation, said it was too early to say when the fire would be put out, but he was encouraged by how the foam was working.

"Water alone is not going to penetrate," he said. "Without foam, it can be a losing battle."

Thalhamer, who arrived at the site on Jan. 15, said his job is to provide the operation with technical expertise and to ensure that those in charge of putting out the fire get the resources they need.

Thalhamer is more familiar with landfill and tire fires, including the tire blaze that broke out near Tracy in summer 1998 and smoldered for 30 months. The Crippen fire is not the largest with which he's been involved, but he said it poses special challenges to firefighters and equipment.

"Basically, it has really steep slopes, many unknown materials and is deep-seated," he said. "It's a very long pile, with fires burning at different spots."

Temperatures in some areas of the pile range from 300 degrees to 400 degrees. "In other areas, the temperature can be up to 1,000 degrees," he said.

"It's a wood-burning stove," he said, after pausing to find another way to describe what firefighters are up against.

And while the wood debris appears to be burning the hottest, firefighters also are finding metal, sheet rock, brick and other materials, Thalhamer said.

Because of the smoky air caused by the fire, Fresno Unified School District officials started keeping students inside last week and canceled outdoor after-school sports and practices. District spokeswoman Jill Marmelojo said Wednesday it was up to each school to decide whether to allow students outdoors.

As for lifting the after-school restrictions, Marmelojo said that decision would be based on air-quality readings each morning.

Air-pollution control officials said a weak storm system was pushing winds southeast across the Valley on Wednesday, but they cautioned people to be aware that smoke is still a concern. Particulate levels were forecast to be 133 on the Air Quality Index today, an unhealthy level for

people with asthma, other respiratory conditions and heart disease. Officials said all residents should be cautious about prolonged outdoor activities when they can smell smoke.

The reporter can be reached at lgalvan@fresnobee.com or 441-6139.

IF YOU GO

A public meeting to discuss the wood-debris fire in southwest Fresno will begin at 5:30 p.m. today in the council chambers at Fresno City Hall, 2600 Fresno St.
Details: (559) 498-1560

LA Company Buys Dinuba Biomass Plant

Valley Voice Newspaper, Week of Jan. 20, 2003

Dinuba - A Los Angeles based disposal company has purchased the 12 megawatt Dinuba Energy power plant where it expects to have a home for its combined loads of green waste and construction waste wood from the Southland.

Crown Disposal and its affiliate Community Recycling of Simi Valley have bought the facility from Fresno State University who has owned it for the past few years.

The plant had been gifted to the college from Yanke Energy who had operated the plant next to the old saw mill in Dinuba that has been closed for a number of years. Yanke will continue to run the plant for the new owner, says John Richardson, VP for Community Recycling. The new Dinuba plant will be called Community Renewable Energy Service and will sell the power to PG&E.

"We generate about 350 tons of material a day" collected from towns like San Bernardino that have contracts with the company, says Richardson. He says that other L.A. area recyclers generate about the same amount a day that is all hauled to the valley biomass plants to be burned.

"We supply material to biomass plants up and down the valley," says Richardson. But with the recent uncertainty over the future of biomass - the state is considering withdrawing financial support to keep them running - Richardson said the purchase "could provide some stability and secure a market for our materials."

Richardson says the cogeneration plant will continue to burn locally produced green waste at its current 30 to 40% of tonnage rate in the future. The state funds biomass plants based on requirements that they must burn locally produced green waste.

But the Valley Air District top official David Crow says the valley biomass plants have a key function - to burn locally produced green waste and wood material "Importation of the material is less desirable from our point of view." Crow says he was aware that a number of Los Angeles communities bring in material to burn at valley biomass plants motivated by the high disposal fees in the LA basin. "That motivation gets the materials to the gate of the biomass plants," says Crow while farmers would otherwise do open field burning of orchards and green waste don't have the strong motivation.

Cities throughout the state are under mandate to reduce the amount of materials going to their landfills by 50% and biomass material from urban areas can make up 30% or more of the tonnage.

This issue remains tops on the public agenda because of rising acknowledgment of our bad air and the role biomass plant plays in keeping our air from getting any worse.

The Air Board estimates that existing biomass plants in the valley prevent another 4.6 tons of Nox - a major precursor to smog - from entering our atmosphere. Biomass burning is said to be 96% cleaner than open field burning. A 1997 study found at one plant - Delano Energy - without the plant 7451 tons of pollutants would have been emitted from the material burned in the plant emitting just 262 tons of pollutants.

But the uncertainty over the future of these facilities remains very much in doubt.

Governor Gray Davis is seeking to cut the state budget where it can has proposed eliminating a \$4 million subsidy to the plants like Dinuba, Terra Bella and Delano as of June threatening their viability. Because of the decline in energy prices, the power produced by biomass is not as competitive as it once was.

Some have argued that farmers must be prevented by ordinance from continuing massive open field burning providing an incentive to get the orchards chipped and material trucked to biomass plants where it can be burned far more cleanly.

Today there are some 30 biomass plants statewide - about half the number there used to be in the state.

Some air officials believe that biomass plants can play key roles but only if we see them as air scrubbers - not power producers. Structuring an incentive between the farmer, chipper, trucker and biomass operators must be in line - a sort of vertical integration of this business to insure a smooth operation.

Crow believes these biomass plants, that were after all creatures of federal energy policy back in the 80s, should be offered a federal tax incentive to keep them viable.

Crow says in a potential "tweek" of federal legislation with Senator Dianne Feinstein a decade ago there was a plan that could allow a tax credit to biomass operators if they collected material from the area in proximity of the cogen rather than the current law that says the materials have to grown on the site to qualify for the tax credit.

That little change in the law was never made.

Putting this twist on the current law could intensify the growth of woody materials by farmers near biomass plants providing some economic benefit for hard hit farmers. Biomass plants can also make renewable fuel like ethanol or biodiesel.

Crow says farm groups are meeting this month to discuss how they could reduce open field burning in a valley choking with heavy particulates already.

A recent study of the biomass industry in California suggests biomass materials from furniture, construction lumber and right-of-way tree prunings along with forest and woodland biomass is increasing as the state's population grows. But of the 50 million tons of biomass generated in California biomass plants have used only 9 million tons. With the closure of a number of biomass plants the value of biomass used by the plants is down to 6 million tons creating a surplus of materials and driving down biomass fuel prices.

Biomass plants used to pay for materials as high as \$40/BDT but now expect to receive feed stock for the plant for nothing.

So in the meantime, the biomass operators in the valley are happy to have LA's waste trucked to their door, ironically becoming potentially a part of the problem of the valley's air quality.

Richardson says purchase of the Dinuba plant does not include the 140 acre saw mill site that has been torn down now but is available for some other use held by Yanke.

Power Shift in Valley

Sale of Dinuba Energy is in the works, but buyer plans to keep the plant's name, 26 employees.

By Dennis Pollock, The Fresno Bee, January 22, 2003, 10:21 AM)

A Southern California disposal company is close to completing a deal for Dinuba Energy, a biomass plant owned by California State University, Fresno.

"We've been trying to buy the plant for some years; we think it adds some stability," said John Richardson, vice president for Community Recycling of Sun Valley in Southern California.

The company could complete the purchase after a generator is repaired, Richardson said. The plant will continue to operate as Dinuba Energy.

Richardson expects the plant will continue to accept between 50% to 60% of its wood waste from urban areas, including cities in Los Angeles, Ventura and Kern counties. The remaining waste will come from agricultural uses.

Community Recycling plans to keep the 26 employees at the plant, and Richardson said he hopes "to encourage location of additional industry, especially a cold storage facility, on a nearby sawmill property."

"They could use steam and electricity from the plant."

The neighboring property was once home to Sequoia Forest Industries, which closed in 2000 after 50 years.

Community Recycling also built a composting facility in Lamont in Kern County in the early 1990s.

Deborah Adishian-Astone, executive director of Auxiliary Corporations at Fresno State, said the plant was a gift to the university in 1999 from Ron Yanke, a principal of Yanke Energy in Boise, Idaho.

"We brought the plant back into working condition and learned a lot about the energy market," she said. "But we wanted to allow the auxiliary to focus more on campus services we provide."

A San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District official expressed some concerns over the pending sale.

"The venture was initially designed to burn ag waste," said Seyed Sadredin, the district's director of permit services. "If the owners are people from outside the Valley with waste being one of their byproducts, we think there will be a tendency to go that direction rather than seeking more ag waste."

The district estimates the Valley's biomass plants prevent about 4.6 tons of smog-creating nitrogen oxides from entering the air. Biomass burning is believed to be 96% cleaner than open-field burning.

"We'll take a close look at this permit application to see if there is a legal way to minimize the amount of outside waste they can bring in," Sadredin said.

Three biomass plants operate in the Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Richardson said his company has supplied material to biomass plants elsewhere in the Valley.

A state mandate requires cities to reduce the amount of materials going to landfills by 50%, and biomass material from urban areas can make up nearly a third of the tonnage.

The Dinuba plant sells power to the state Department of Water Resources on an interim contract that has been extended through June 30.

"I'm afraid we don't know what will happen July 1," Richardson said of the contract.

By June, the Dinuba plant, along with Sierra Power in Terra Bella and Madera Power in Firebaugh, must negotiate contracts with Pacific Gas & Electric Co., Southern California Edison and San Diego Gas and Electric Co.

[Fresno Bee Editorial, January 23, 2003](#)

Keep up the pressure

Quick fixes and sound-bite solutions won't help the Valley's filthy air.

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 PM2.5 and 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 on 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.

[Letters to the Editor, Fresno Bee, January 23, 2003](#)

'Open our eyes'

By Michele Katharine Fogal
Fresno

The Fresno air is more polluted due to the wood pile fire. This fire could have been prevented if the city had kept track of the permits that Archie Crippen had or didn't have for his trash pile, which includes chemicals and other hazardous substances. We as Fresnans need to realize that we must take care of our air.

I know that on Jan. 17 I had problems with my allergies, along with some of my classmates, due to the smoke that was in the air caused by the fire. Because of the fire, local schools had to cancel outdoor activities as well as indoor physical activities. Two elementary schools near the fire sent students and teachers home because of the poor air quality. This cut into the instructional time for those students.

I know that as high school students we enjoy being active and like being outdoors, but because of this fire we have been restricted to sitting inside. Children's Hospital of Central California has seen more patients with respiratory problems such as asthma.

Why was there not a more aggressive approach to put out the fire when it first started? Now they are saying that it will take 10 to 15 days before the fire will be put out. It will take a lot longer to get our air quality back to the way it should be.

This should make us open our eyes and realize that we need to do something to fix our problem with air pollution. Why should we be proud that Fresno is the one of the worst cities for air pollution? Los Angeles actually did something about it instead of making excuses and getting an extension to make the problem better, which means we have more time to make it worse. So what are we going to do about our poor air quality for future generations?

'Healthy refuge'

By Floyd L. Judd

The wood pile fire in Fresno has made the air so unhealthy that we cannot go outdoors without suffering. The local air district has advised teachers to keep students indoors. A Jan. 15 article points out that Joshua Tree National Park is on the list of the nation's imperiled parks.

This makes the point to me that we need to protect our remaining wilderness in California that provides us a refuge of clean air and water. We need to protect areas like Dinkey Creek, the Kings River and Mineral King as a healthy refuge for the public.

We have a great opportunity in California to protect these areas with the California Wild Heritage Campaign. We need to make sure that our children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy these special areas, drink clean water and breathe clean air.