

Samples discover hazards at fire

But the 18 chemicals are not at strong enough levels to harm the health of Fresnoans.

By Mark Grossi, The Fresno Bee, January 28, 2003

Authorities on Monday released a list of 18 potentially hazardous chemicals detected in air samples more than a week ago at the southwest Fresno junk fire.

But they repeated an announcement they made last week that the chemicals were not detected at levels high enough to trigger human health problems.

Only two chemicals -- benzene and chloromethane -- were mentioned in the first announcement because they were detected at the fence line, said Michelle Rogow, on-scene coordinator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"The majority of the substances were coming from samples taken at the hottest parts of the fire," Rogow said.

"They are products of combustion that you would see in most any fire."

But authorities continue to warn residents the tiny soot and ash particles still being released from the 17-day-old fire are a danger.

The San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District predicted today's pollution would make the air unhealthy for those with sensitive lungs.

The district and others continued cautioning all residents about spending a lot of time outside if they smell smoke.

Assembly Member Sarah Reyes and Fresno City Council Member Cynthia Sterling announced Monday that there would be a free health screening from 10 a.m. to noon Saturday for children living in the southwest Fresno area. The screening will be at Addams Elementary School at McKinley and Hughes avenues.

The fire, which has been burning since Jan. 11 at the Archie Crippen Excavation site near Nielsen and Marks avenues, is about 70% controlled, officials said. Firefighters are now working the most intense part of the fire -- the north side of the heap.

Officials do not have an estimate when the fire will be extinguished. Firefighting costs have climbed to about \$900,000, but EPA officials say the total does not account for all the federal costs.

The EPA is authorized to spend up to \$1.85 million on the fire, Rogow said. The state Integrated Waste Management Board has committed to pick up \$500,000 of the cost.

The \$1.85 million figure is contained in a memo from Rogow to EPA supervisors. The memo, which also contained the 18 chemicals detected in the fire, justified EPA's involvement in the Crippen fire suppression effort.

Though the fire is in an industrial area, the memo noted the property owner, Archie Crippen, and one of his employees lived on the site. Other residences are within a few blocks, and schools are located within a one-mile radius.

The memo also outlined a risk to drinking and farm water supplies in the area. The fire also could result in fatalities, it said.

"Unfortunately, that's a risk that firefighters take," Rogow said.

Don't light today, district says

Hanford Sentinel, January 26, 2003

FRESNO - Once again, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District is asking residents to not use wood-burning fireplaces through this afternoon.

The request is designed to combat rising air pollution levels in Kings, Fresno and Madera counties.

Those who must use fireplaces are asked to use only gas inserts or EPA-certified wood and pellet stoves; burn only dry, seasoned wood; use manufactured fireplace logs; allow the fire to receive a generous air supply; and build small, hot fires.

How to balance the budget and clean air

[Letter to the Editor, Modesto Bee, January 28, 2003](#)

Hiking the gasoline tax by 10 cents could raise \$1.5 billion in additional revenues while lowering emissions.

By MICHAEL G. HART

The current budget crisis will require a major reduction of government in Sacramento. But even the most extreme reduction will not bridge the \$34.8 billion gap. There will need to be an increase in taxes as well. Rather than simply increase sales tax or the income tax, we should first focus on taxes that can create a positive social benefit. A pair of taxes on the use of fossil fuels could contribute \$4 billion a year toward solving the budget crisis and clean our skies in the process.

Last year California's 35 million residents consumed 2.6 billion gallons of diesel fuel and about 14 billion gallons of gasoline. The state is growing at a rate of about one million new residents every two years. There has not been an increase in the 18-cent sales tax on gasoline in California since 1990 and inflation has eroded a third of that as the relative price of gasoline has fallen.

An additional tax of 10 cents per gallon on these fuels for the general fund would generate \$1.66 billion in new revenue each year, and could lead to a substantial reduction in emission and congestion. While any reduction in driving would result in fewer taxes raised, the social benefits far outweigh these losses.

Driving reductions are most likely the least fuel-efficient cars, meaning that hundreds of tons of smog producing gasses will not be released into our atmosphere each year. A 10 percent reduction in diesel emissions alone this could mean a reduction of 2,700 tons of dangerous particulate matter going into our air each year. It will also mean that the rest of the driving public will see a reduction in traffic on the roads. Even with a 10 percent reduction in consumption, the net tax raised would be \$1.5 billion each year.

Californians driving the least efficient cars would pay the greatest tax. Some could call this an "SUV tax" as a fair way to impose a reasonable social burden on creating more pollution than more efficient automobiles.

There will be some who will argue that the fuel taxes should not be used to reduce the deficit and should instead only be spent on roads. The logic of this argument baffles me. I have sat in hearings and heard legislators make this argument as if it were the Eleventh Commandment. There is nothing sacred about fuel or taxes on fuel. The logic of fuel taxes being spent only on roads would require taxes on liquor only being spent on beer gardens and rehab centers; it would necessitate that cigarette taxes only be spent on smoking lounges and mortuaries. It is a valid potential source of tax revenue, and a far preferable one to a general tax increase.

What about electricity? Prices are at record lows and this is where much of our budget woes began. California has developed a dangerous dependence on fossil fuel-fired power plants. Gas-fired plants keep the registers ringing for out-of-state gas producers. Most of the current budget

deficit can be tracked back up our power lines to these gas-fired plants and from there back up gas lines to huge out-of-state producers which have manipulated this highly vulnerable market.

We really don't know where they will be next year, or the year after that. Good public policy is to guide us away from dependence on these out-of-state money machines. Presently, California must import 84 percent of its natural gas supply from out of state -- an enormous drain on the California economy. This tax would be the first step toward reversing this trend.

Last year, California consumed 275,793 gigawatts of power. Of this, 44 percent came from fossil fuel fired plants (natural gas, oil and coal). Imposing a 2.2 cent per kilowatt-hour tax on all power produced by fossil fuel powered plants would result in approximately \$2.66 billion in revenue while raising overall energy costs just one-tenth of a cent per kilowatt-hour. The PUC would have to allow this tax to flow from the producers through to the consumers, but it would even the playing field for more benign sources of power such as solar, wind and biofuel, which the state is trying to promote.

If consumers reduced consumption 10 percent, as they did during the 2001 energy crisis to reduce their cost of power, we could spare our skies of a million tons of emissions from the least efficient of these producers. Even with a 10 percent reduction in consumption, the net tax raised would be \$2.4 billion each year.

Between these two taxes, the \$4 billion raised each year could be used initially to reduce the deficit and eventually could be turned toward alternative fuels and energy sources to further reduce our reliance on these fossil fuels.

Great leaders see opportunity in disaster. Our budget crisis may create an environment where creating these very beneficial taxes is not only good for the budget, but good for California.

[Hart, one of The Bee's visiting editors, is the owner of Sierra Railroad.](#)