

Calwa recycling plant fire sends smoke plumes over Fresno

By Jim Guy and Eddie Jimenez, staff writers
The Fresno Bee, Wed., June 20, 2012

A midday fire at a Calwa textile recycling plant Wednesday sent a plume of thick, black smoke high into the sky and wafting over wide swaths of Fresno.

Gary Sanger, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Hanford, said satellite images showed the plume that spread northward over downtown covered about 17 square miles -- or more than twice as large as Millerton Lake.

The fire at Soex West Textile Recycling started about 11 a.m. when plant employees were using a grinder to cut metal outside the warehouse, Fresno County Fire Capt. John Dominguez said. Sparks from the grinder ignited a grass fire, which quickly spread to fabric bales stored on the property and one end of the 7,000-square-foot warehouse, he said.

Dominguez said the fire consumed about two acres of bales of fabric, including carpet and other cloth material, that were stacked 15 feet high. He estimated the blaze would be completely extinguished late Wednesday.

Plant workers were evacuated with no injuries. The extent of damage to the warehouse was still being assessed.

The spectacle couldn't be missed. Train traffic on lines about a half-mile west of the plant, which is on Orange Avenue near Church Avenue, was stopped, causing several crossings to be blocked. Vehicle traffic in the area was snarled, too, and onlookers gawked at the rising flames -- estimated by onlookers to reach as high as 100 feet at the height of the fire.

The smoke plume, which could easily be seen at Woodward Park 12 miles away, was so thick that it blocked out the sun in the neighborhoods around the plant.

Dominguez said he did not immediately know what kind of work was being done inside the warehouse, but the fabric bales were not related to the current business operation and may have been left on the Soex property by the previous owner. He said previous fires have also erupted in the bales.

A homeless encampment near the Soex property was also evacuated by police.

Firefighters from Fresno County were joined by Fresno City, Selma and Cal Fire in battling the blaze. Three ladder trucks poured water on the blaze and a bulldozer was brought in to help break up the burning bales.

Some firefighters fought the fire from an adjacent warehouse. The hot day -- it was 87 degrees when the fire erupted and arced into the 90s as the afternoon wore on -- took its toll on firefighters. Two were treated at the scene for minor injuries, and many more could be seen taking breaks to recuperate.

The smoke had little effect on air quality in the area, said Jaime Holt, spokeswoman for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. The plume stayed near the inversion level and didn't return to the ground, she said.

Slight breezes also helped to disperse the smoke, she said.

Holt said district staff members were sent out Wednesday to monitor air quality in southeast Fresno.

The air district's air-quality forecast for today was unhealthy for sensitive groups -- not unusual for a hot summer day in the Valley.

The recycling plant is owned by a German company, the Soex Group, that does business worldwide. It also has U.S. plants in Los Angeles and New Jersey.

Calls Wednesday to the company's U.S. plants were not returned. According to the Soex Group website, its Fresno plant is a 340,000-square-foot recycling factory on 25 acres and employs 100 workers who take clothing that's too worn, torn or dirty to be deemed wearable and turns it into raw-material fiber to be used to make industrial products, including automotive insulation and carpet underlay. It wasn't clear whether that's the work that was being done at the plant now.

According to the state Division of Occupational Safety and Health, Soex was fined \$103,600 last year for safety violations at the Fresno plant. The investigation was opened in February 2010 after a worker lost his right thumb in an industrial accident.

Investigators found 12 violations, but none were related to fire safety.

Farm Bill amendment targets \$16M for clean tractors

The Business Journal Wed., June 20, 2012

The U.S. Senate has passed an amendment to the 2012 Farm Bill that would provide \$16 million to help local farmers replace existing tractors with more efficient, less polluting tractors.

Under the plan, farmers in Fresno County and other areas where pollution is a problem would pay half the cost of replacing their tractors. Overall, the Air Quality Initiative, which must still be approved by the House, helps farmers with air quality projects to meet federal, state and local regulatory requirements.

Besides tractor replacement, the amendment would provide funding for more efficient stationary diesel engines, applying oil to dirt to cut down on dust and better soil management.

"This is great," said Manuel Cunha Jr., president of the Nisei Farmers League in Fresno. A Senate super committee stripped the funding amendment that first appeared in the Farm Bill back in 2008. The clean air amendment and its funding plan stems from the EPA's 1989 Clean Air Act that addresses toxic air pollution in urban and farm environments.

"Sen. Feinstein fought and got it back in," Cunha said.

Beside Sen. Diane Feinstein, D-Calif., the amendment had the support of Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif. and Sen. Jon Kyle, R-Ariz. A coalition led by the California Farm Bureau Federation and the Nisei Farmers League praised the Senate for ensuring that the Air Quality Initiative remains a vital part of the Farm Bill.

"Air quality improvement and the stewardship of natural resources are priorities for farmers," said Paul Wenger, California Farm Bureau president in a release. "We thank Senators Feinstein, Boxer and Kyle, as well as others who helped the amendment pass."

Wenger added, "We hope that the House will recognize the importance of the program and maintain it in the bill."

Farmers and ranchers in California, Arizona, Texas and other states benefit from the program. The Air Quality Initiative provides assistance to farmers and ranchers for conservation practices that preserve or improve air quality. The program prioritizes money for areas of the country with the highest air quality concerns. In California alone, more than 1,100 farmers and ranchers partnered with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service on projects that reduced emissions an estimated 5 tons per day, which is the equivalent of removing more than 408,000 cars from California roads.

Brown backs away from bullet train fight

By Lance Williams, California Watch

In the Fresno Bee and Bakersfield Californian, Thursday, June 21, 2012

Gov. Jerry Brown backed away from a fight with environmentalists yesterday, abandoning a plan to exempt the \$68 billion California bullet train project from environmental laws.

Brown had hoped to fast-track construction of the controversial project by sidestepping key provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act.

But the idea had put him at odds with most of the state's green groups.

The Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Planning and Conservation League were among the organizations that in recent days had strongly criticized Brown's plan.

The Sierra Club had called Brown's idea "dangerous" and "a political mistake."

Most of the state's environmental groups backed Brown in his 2010 campaign for governor. Several green groups have been firm supporters of the rail project, which would link San Francisco and Los Angeles with trains traveling more than 200 miles per hour.

Environmentalists said they were informed that Brown was abandoning the plan by Ken Alex, director of the governor's Office of Planning and Research.

Brown's press office referred questions to the state High-Speed Rail Authority, which declined to comment.

Brown's decision removed potential roadblocks to environmental lawsuits aimed at stopping the bullet train.

But the move also might shore up legislative support for the project. For construction to begin, lawmakers soon must approve the sale of billions of dollars in state rail construction bonds.

Kathryn Phillips, executive director of Sierra Club California, said her organization wants the bullet train built. But first, she said it needs an extensive review under environmental laws.

Brown's decision was "very good news," Phillips said. But she said she worries that lawmakers will make further attempts to carve out exemptions from environmental review for projects that need close scrutiny.

"I frankly would like the governor and the Legislature to spend less time trying to dismantle environmental review and more time working with us to solve the most critical environmental problems in the state," she said.

Bruce Reznik, executive director of the Planning and Conservation League, said his group hadn't yet decided whether it would now support the bullet train.

The governor's office floated the exemption idea earlier this month. According to environmentalists, the governor's aides had portrayed the idea as limited and technical in nature: They mainly wanted to block judges in environmental lawsuits from issuing stop work orders on the bullet train project. Delays of that sort might cost California billions in federal aid, the administration says.

The environmental groups support high-speed rail as an eco-friendly transportation alternative to more freeways and airports, while the construction industry and labor unions say the project will create thousands of jobs.

But opponents on the San Francisco Peninsula and in the Central Valley have sued to stop the project, claiming construction would wreck residential neighborhoods and prime farmland.

So far, four lawsuits have been filed under terms of the Environmental Quality Act, a 40-year-old-law that requires developers to write comprehensive reports describing the pluses and minuses of big construction projects. These environmental impact reports also must propose strategies for blunting projects' effects on air and water pollution and urban sprawl.

If critics believe that a report doesn't accurately describe a project or address its problems, they can sue, and the legal process can be prolonged.

When developers lose - as the rail authority already has, twice, in Bay Area lawsuits - they may be required to redo their reports, which takes still more time. The law gives judges the power to issue stop work orders to force legal compliance.

Development interests long have complained about the process. In recent years, the state Legislature has granted exemptions for prison and highway projects, as well as for a proposed professional football stadium in Los Angeles.

But no exemption so far has been as expansive as what Brown's office had envisioned for the bullet train, said Oakland lawyer Stuart Flashman, who represents Peninsula-based opponents of the bullet train in two lawsuits.

Its purpose was "to wipe out all the environmental challenges," he said in an interview before Brown dropped the idea.

[Bakersfield Californian Editorial, Wed., Jun 20, 2012:](#)

Time to adopt tighter rules on air pollution

The federal government is long overdue in updating standards for fine particulates, one of the most lethal types of air pollution and one that is prevalent in high concentrations in the San Joaquin Valley. Last week, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency proposed to finally update the current standard, set in 1997, to a more protective level. This new standard must be adopted.

Science has uncovered a lot in the 15 years since the current PM 2.5 standard was set. These tiny particles measuring less than 2.5 microns, or about one-thirtieth the width of a human hair, are emitted by tailpipes, diesel engines and smokestacks. When breathed in, they lodge deep in the lungs where they can exacerbate lung and heart conditions.

A study released last year, done in our backyard, linked rising particulate levels to an increase in children's asthma-related emergency room visits in the San Joaquin Valley. The study looked at children in Modesto, Fresno and Bakersfield and found an extra 1,596 hospital visits a year due to elevated PM 2.5 pollution, with a cost of about \$1,500 per ER visit. The study also found increased emergency visits for children with pneumonia and adults with asthma and cardiovascular problems.

Another notable statewide study attributed PM 2.5 with 183 premature deaths each year in Kern County, along with thousands of missed days of school and work, amounting to billions of dollars in health care costs and lost productivity. The science makes it clear that PM 2.5 has public health impacts that we all pay for.

The San Joaquin Valley has not yet attained the current PM 2.5 standard -- it was violated on 38 days in 2011. So are we advocating for another standard the valley can't meet? Under the proposed new standard, air basins would have to attain the new standard by 2020. And the EPA estimates nearly all air basins, including the valley, can meet that deadline. If the new standard is at all within reach, the valley should strive to reach it. But regardless of how long it takes to meet, the federal government should adopt the standard that science has shown to be safe.

What we don't support is the federal government imposing punitive fines that don't take into account regional challenges and progress when these standards aren't met on time. The San Joaquin Valley's geography contributes heavily to the air pollution problem and some studies have suggested pollution from other regions may be wafting into the valley, adding to our problem. The valley faces significant hurdles not faced by many other regions in its attempt to clean up the air.

Many communities in the valley also still have double-digit unemployment, making it difficult to consider pollution rules that may increase costs for companies. State and regional air regulators who carry out EPA rules should be given the latitude to grant reasonable delays in implementing stricter pollution controls in extreme economic situations like these. But the right of the public to breathe clean air can't continually be compromised.

The Clean Air Act was intended to protect the public from air pollution known to be hazardous. Ample research has shown the current PM 2.5 standard is outdated. It's time for the federal government to side with science and the public's health and approve tighter standards for air pollution.