

# Airport dig yields drums of jellied fuel

*Cleanup of napalm-like material costs \$150,000*

---

**By Richard Block**

---

About 1,100 gallons of inflammable jelly containing benzene has been found buried in disintegrating metal drums at the Chino Airport, according to county Director of Airports Mike Williams.

While excavating dirt to install storm drains for the planned Southern California Edison helicopter hangar, workers discovered the drums two to three feet underground and notified the county department of airports July 22, Mr. Williams said. Within hours, the department began excavation and cleanup, he said.

By Aug. 18, 51 55-gallon drums of the substance had been uncovered. The drums likely date back to the late 1960s or early 1970s, Mr. Williams said.

"The drums were in pretty poor shape, so we were very careful pulling them out of the ground," Mr. Williams said.

Some of the gel has leaked into the soil, and the airports department has begun a cleanup.

The analysis of the substance has been completed, Mr. Williams said. It contains benzene, he said, but he could not say what use the substance might have been put to.

"I can't confirm that it's napalm," Mr. Williams said. "I can tell you that it's a possibility, but I can't tell you what it is."

Napalm is a jellied fuel used in bombs. According to Medscape.com, a service of the WebMD online medical information company, the modern version of napalm, invented after World War II, contains benzene, gasoline, and polystyrene.

Mr. Williams said the airports department's first responsibility is to clean up the site and determine what to do with contaminated soil. He said there are several ways to

deal with such soil, including destruction, aeration, and blending with clean soil. A combination of these measures will likely be used, he said.

Before their burial, the drums were stacked on pallets, fragments of which could still be seen, Mr. Williams said. Twice during the excavation, workers discovered pieces of explosive charges, Mr. Williams said. Work was halted and specialists from the county sheriff's department and Marine Corps were consulted.

"It was not a live charge," Mr. Williams said. "It was a very, very minimal chance of being detonated."

County airports department Assistant Director James Jenkins said waste oil and other substances have been discovered underground at the airport, but this was the first time that ordnance had been discovered.

The federal Environmental Protection Agency, the county hazardous-materials division, and independent contractors have helped with the cleanup, for which regulatory oversight falls to the Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board, Mr. Williams said.

"There is no information to suggest that the material got into the groundwater," he said.

The cost of the cleanup has been \$150,000 to date, he said. That cost will rise, and the final figure will depend on what disposal methods are used for the contaminated soil.

The airports department has done an initial radar scan of the surrounding ground for additional material, but has found none, Mr. Williams said. The plan is to get the soil off the site, fill the pit, then do another radar analysis.

"We want to be prudent that we've found what we can," the

airports director concluded. "If we find something, we'll have to deal with it accordingly." Gas borings and ultrasound readings have been performed at the airport to deal with an underground plume of toxic chemicals, Mr. Jenkins said. The plume is in the same area but much deeper underground and is unrelated to the jellied benzene, Mr. Williams said.

Once cleanup is complete, the airports department will examine its records to determine who might have buried the drums. The EPA may help with that investigation.

"We have suspicions, but we don't know specifically" who buried the barrels, Mr. Williams said.

If the substance turns out to be napalm manufactured or ordered by the government, he said, that information could be useful as the county seeks reimbursement for its cleanup costs.

Mr. Williams said the department feels very positive about the airport's history.

Notably, during World War II, pilots were trained at Cal-Aero Academy, located on the site. In the past, Mr. Williams said of the burial, environmental regulations weren't what they are now.

"That was normal in that era," he said. "We're just left to deal with the repercussions."

*Published Saturday, Aug. 21, 2010  
in the Chino Champion*