

## **Fires cost Forward Landfill \$4M**

By Alex Breitler, Record Staff Writer  
Stockton Record, Saturday, March 31, 2012

The operators of privately owned Forward Landfill east of Stockton have agreed to pay \$4 million after multiple fires smoldered in recent years, officials announced this week.

Most of that money will be used to improve the landfill's methane-gas collection system and to replace diesel trucks with cleaner vehicles. But the legal settlement also includes a \$200,000 civil penalty, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of California.

"Landfill fires that deteriorate the air quality in the San Joaquin Valley are unacceptable," said Environmental Protection Agency Regional Administrator Jared Blumenfeld. The EPA joined the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District in filing a lawsuit against Forward last year.

Like all landfills, the decomposition of garbage at Forward produces methane, an explosive gas that also is a potent contributor to climate change.

The landfill is dotted with hundreds of wells that collect the methane and then either burn it off or use it to generate power.

The lawsuit alleged that in the process of collecting methane, the wells sucked in too much oxygen-rich air from above ground, creating conditions ripe for subterranean fires. Forward's operations were in violation of the terms of its permit and the federal Clean Air Act, the government claimed.

The lawsuit doesn't specify how many fires took place at Forward in 2007, 2008 and 2009. A state inspection report from May 2009, however, says seven underground fires had burned there over a period of 18 months.

The government also alleged that Forward submitted inaccurate documentation, did not report one fire in 2007 and never got a permit for a compost facility at the landfill.

Forward denied the allegations as part of the agreement, which allows both sides to avoid extended litigation.

If found liable by a judge, Forward's operators could have faced fines of as much as \$32,500 per day.

Kevin Basso - the general manager of Allied Waste Services, which owns Forward - was not available for comment Friday. In court documents, Forward defended its record, saying it used a nationally recognized engineering firm to monitor its landfill gas collection system and submitted regular reports to the EPA and the air district.

Wells with high quantities of oxygen were shut down, the documents say, adding that air district inspectors assured Forward at the time that the landfill was in compliance.

Landfill fires are not uncommon. They can smolder underground for weeks or even months at a time, and might be detected only by elevated levels of carbon monoxide gas or smoke rising from the landfill itself, according to a consultant's report prepared for the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Smoke contains tiny particulate matter, a deadly form of air pollution in the Valley.

Forward has been in the news for two other recent issues. It was placed on warning in 2010 after inspectors repeatedly found high levels of methane gas. By early 2011, six large new wells had been built to correct the problem.

The 567-acre landfill is also seeking permission to expand onto adjacent farmland already owned by Forward. The plan is opposed by farm advocates, some neighbors and pilots at the nearby airport.