Lessons of the Oakland firestorm: the 'fire of the future'?

by Evelyn Lantz

Do you call a fire that raced unchecked at critical points because one-third of the firefighters had been laid off, while those who remained often had no water, a "natural disaster"?

The mass destruction caused by the Oct. 20-21 firestorm in Oakland, California, was definitely not a "natural" disaster. The catastrophe was created by budget gouging, by failure to invest in infrastructure, and by a false belief among wealthier residents of Oakland that they could let the rest of the city fall apart with impunity.

The Oakland firestorm claimed at least 25 lives, injured 148 people, and destroyed 3,354 homes and apartments. It has been dubbed the "fire of the future." Unless the current depression and budget cuts are reversed, it certainly will be. But not for the reasons usually given; the problem is an expanding economic depression, not an expanding population.

The Oakland Fire Department, which has been unjustly scapegoated, did a creditable job fighting the Sunday Oct. 20 inferno, given the budget cuts it has endured, according to Ray Alberti, director of the fire technology program at Hayward's Chabot College. The department has shrunk from 622 firefighters in 1974 to 424 today, and lost four fire engines, three engine companies, and one truck crew. Its training division was cut from the budget before being restored two years ago.

A retired assistant fire chief in nearby San Francisco commented that it was widely known throughout the fire service that personnel cuts in recent years have blunted Oakland's readiness. The number of firefighters on duty at any one time in Oakland is 136, responsible for 68 square miles. San Francisco, which has suffered its own severe cutbacks, has 297 firefighters on duty to cover 49 square miles, which is more than twice the manpower capacity per square mile of territory.

The Oakland Fire Department has an antiquated radio system, with only five channels. Most departments the size of Oakland's have dozens of frequencies to ease communications in crises like the Oct. 20-21 fire. Oakland also has fire hydrant connections which don't take a standard hose, creating delays when other fire departments respond to mutual aid calls. In the Oct. 20-21 disaster, with the fire racing 60 miles per hour at some points, firemen from other departments had to wait 15-20 minutes while adapters were located to allow them to fight the fire.

Plenty of fuel but no water

The financially strapped city ignored repeated requests to clear overgrown areas which posed a fire hazard. One resident of the burnt area had often requested that Oakland clean out a three-acre patch of overgrown chapparal known as "the Bermuda Triangle." In one of his letters to the city, he had warned that the area might become a firestorm. It provided fuel to help burn down 75 homes on Oct. 20.

Even after five years of drought, there was plenty of water potentially available to fight the fire. Yet many fire hydrants ran dry, or had very low pressure. In one instance, a fire company waited 20 minutes, watching houses burn down, until water could be brought in by truck. When they finally got some water, they were able to stop the fire from racing into another section of Oakland.

What happened to the water? The responsible government district, the East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD), had ignored warnings from a blue ribbon panel to install emergency backup power for pumps needed to pump the water uphill to the reservoirs serving the fire hydrants. All but one of the 11 key reservoirs serving the fire area ran dry after the blaze knocked out electricity for the pumps.

EBMUD officials said the on-site emergency power systems, which can cost up to $1 million each, are too expensive. The estimates of losses in the Oct. 20 fire are between $1.5 and $2 billion.

A perhaps less obvious, man-made cause of this disaster is the failure to build critical infrastructure. For example, there is no reason why five years of drought should have left California a parched tinderbox. Had the proposed North American Water and Power Alliance (Nawapa) been built any time in the last 30 years, plentiful water from northern Alaska and Canada could have been greening the farms and cities of California—cheaply.

'Economic recovery' is destroying California

Oakland, located across the bay from San Francisco, is California's sixth largest city, with a population of 372,000. Both Oakland and San Francisco developed major industrial and port facilities as part of the area-wide shipbuilding, re-

fining, and steel buildup during World War II. Unlike San Francisco, Oakland remained industrial well into the 1960s, and a major port for much longer. But by the end of that decade, the city's industrial base began to decline, a victim of the "Great Society" policy that reduced so many American manufacturing cities to dying shells.

Oakland's new leading "industry" became the illegal drug trade, and professional sports, the city's only claim to fame. Streets in Oakland are currently scheduled to be repaired once every 100 years!

Since the "Bush-Reagan economic recovery" began a decade ago, Oakland has lost a third of its manufacturing jobs, collapsing the tax base. Similar crises afflict Alameda County, of which Oakland is the largest city. The state of California became famous last spring for its $14.3 billion budget deficit, triggering major cuts in services.

In the end, austerity didn't even save Oakland money. The city estimated it had spent $10 million fighting the fire, and that it would lose at least $5 million in property taxes. At least several million more dollars will be spent to prevent the soil from the fire-ravaged hills from becoming mudslides.

The Oakland fire also proved that one cannot ruin part of a city—or country—and keep a protected wealthier enclave. For years, Oakland has been two cities—the flatlands where mostly black people live, ravaged by budget cuts and drug wars; and the hills, a rich enclave, insulated from the city's decay. Or, so they thought.

Will things change?

Has the lesson that budget cuts kill, been learned? Apparently not. The media are flooded with titillating stories about where the fire might have started, and who was really responsible for starting it. The question of what allowed the fire to *spread* has been all but ignored.

The cutbacks continue. After the fire, the California Department of Forestry announced that it is shutting down 31 fire lookouts—nearly half the state's lookout force, and removing the last fire spotters from Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, and San Mateo counties, areas experts say are vulnerable to the same fate as the Oakland-Eastbay hills.

The lesson that austerity kills should have been learned in the Oct. 17, 1989 San Francisco area earthquake. More than 40 people died when a section of double-decker freeway in Oakland crumpled. The necessary reinforcements, which would have prevented the collapse, had been scheduled for the early 1970s, but never constructed because of lack of funding.

At that time, rather than heeding the warning and reversing the budget cuts, federal government policy left the City of Oakland even poorer after the earthquake. The federal funds due to the city of Oakland from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to repay costs of responding to that emergency, have not *yet* been paid.

Energy output falls in Soviet republics

by William Engdahl

Following the failed Moscow putsch of Aug. 19, the governments of the newly declared republics of the former U.S.S.R. have placed the question of reorganizing their energy output at the center of their deliberations. In light of recent stories of production collapse and disputes over western concessions to vast unexplored oil regions in the former U.S.S.R., it is useful to review the current situation.

In 1990, for the first time since the end of World War II, the production of primary energy (oil, gas, coal, etc.) in the U.S.S.R. declined in comparison to the year before. The amount of the fall (2.4%) was not as dramatic as were its qualitative implications.

The most dramatic decline in energy production in economic terms occurred in the production of petroleum. Together with export of natural gas, petroleum forms by far the major source for hard currency export earnings.

Since the late 1970s, the Soviet Union has been the world's largest single producer of petroleum. By the late 1980s the peak was reached of almost 12.5 million barrels per day (mbd) output. By comparison, the United States in 1988 was producing slightly more than 8 million, while Saudi Arabia produced less than 5 mbd. In 1990 total petroleum output from all U.S.S.R. oil fields, according to the state statistical agency Goskomstat, reached a level of 11.4 mbd, a decline of almost 750,000 barrels per day from 1989. The 1989 level itself was down from the peak production year of 1988. Oil output in 1990 fell to the level it had been back in 1978. In the first six months of 1991, partly because of the long and bitter wave of strikes in the U.S.S.R. coal mines, at times combined with strike actions in the oil regions, total petroleum production fell dramatically to 10.5 mbd, some 9% lower than in 1990, according to Goskomstat.

Why output is declining

The reasons for the secular decline in oil output are several and interconnected. First, Soviet oil comes primarily from large and rather old reservoirs, mostly in the West Siberian Plain—Samotlor in Tyumen being the largest, followed by Romashkino, a huge field lying between Sverdlovsk and Moscow. Samotlor, the largest in the U.S.S.R., has been