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Chevron warns of aviation-fuel contamination

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Watsonville airport on list

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Chevron is warning pilots at six northern and central California airports, including Watsonville Municipal Airport, that they may have received contaminated aviation gasoline last month and could suffer engine problems as a result.

The problem began May 16 when a leaky valve at Chevron's Richmond refinery allowed jet fuel (a refined form of kerosene) to blend with the 100-octane low-lead gasoline used in piston-driven propeller planes.

The refinery sent loads of the contaminated fuel to airports in Sacramento, Oakland, Petaluma, Concord and Watsonville.

Company officials discovered the mistake two weeks later when a Sacramento pilot had engine trouble and noticed his gas smelled like kerosene, said Chevron spokesman Mike Libbey.

The danger is that the reduced octane level in the contaminated fuel can cause poor combustion and clog the engine.

Federal Aviation Administration officials do not know of any crash landings caused by the contaminated fuel. But the FAA is investigating a recent fatal crash out of Sacramento and last weekend's disappearance of a two-seater Cessna off Half Moon Bay to as-

sess whether either of the pilots filled up their tanks with the contaminated gas, Libbey said.

Using tail numbers recorded when airplanes refuel, Chevron investigators determined neither of the two pilots refueled at five of the six airports affected, he said. The sixth, Oakland, is self-serve so it is not possible to determine whether either of them stopped there.

Watsonville airport manager Don French said the airport was contacted by Chevron June 10 and asked to supply a record of all aircraft that might have received the bad fuel.

"We supplied them with the information and they contacted the pilots," he said. "At our self-service pumps, we gave them the credit card numbers used and they went to the card companies."

The credit card companies, French said, sent out letters to their card holders, asking them to contact Chevron.

"They (Chevron) are going as far as possible to offset any negative comments that might occur," French said.

Libbey confirmed this morning that the company has offered to pay for oil changes, borescoping (a visual examination of the insides of the cylinders), compression

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checks and filter and oil inspections by a licensed aircraft mechanic.

Preliminary estimates are that the oil company will spend about \$1 million on the program, Libbey said.

Local effects of the contaminated fuel seem minor, French said.

"Most of the pilots have burned a lot of fuel and noticed nothing amiss," he said.

"Most pilots already indicated that they have gone through three to four tanks of fuel and they weren't going to do anything. Others want their engines totally inspected."

The load of fuel shipped to Watsonville was the eighth load to come out of the jet fuel-contaminated pipes at the refinery.

The first load, with about 6 percent jet fuel, went to Sacramento Metro and Executive airports. Succeeding loads of aviation fuel that day came from a tank of uncontaminated fuel, but it mixed with the residue of contaminated fuel still in the pipeline between the tank and the truck-loading areas.

"We were the eighth load and had only slight contamination," French said. "The ninth load had no contamination."

The 6,000 gallons of contaminated fuel were delivered into a 12,000-gallon storage tank at the airport, French said, reducing the contamination levels even further. Then it was pumped into aircraft tanks that, in most cases, were already partly filled with clean fuel and the contaminated fuel was diluted even more.

Libbey said tests made on the contaminated fuel in Watsonville's storage tanks showed that it was 100 octane. The company normally delivers fuel with 103 to 104 octane rating for sale as 100 octane low-lead fuel for piston airplanes.

Other than the Sacramento airports, which received the most heavily contaminated fuel, Libbey said the company's tests showed gasoline that was 92 percent to 95 percent pure at the other affected airports.

French said the airport's fuel sales are down from expected levels but doesn't know if the problem is related to the fuel scare or another factor, such as the weather.

Aviation-grade gasoline is expensive, costing \$1.96 at the self-serve pump and \$2.26 a gallon if delivered on flight line from a mobile tanker truck.