

Problems caused by tainted plane fuel solved

Airports
By MARIANNE BIASOTTI

Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Bad fuel ruined the engines of 156 airplanes at the Watsonville Municipal Airport a year ago, but won't ruin the airport's most important event this weekend.

The contamination by jet fuel that damaged many Northern California airplanes was discovered last June, just a month after

Watsonville ■ *Fly-in news — D1* airport's annual West Coast Antique Fly-In and Air Show. Pilots now say some aircraft flying in the show were running on bad fuel, and pilots didn't know it.

But days before this year's event, flight instructors with the Santa Cruz Flying Club say they're relieved that planes grounded from the Chevron fuel problem were repaired in time for the air show, which marks their flying season's take-off.

"People come out and see the airplanes, like them and get interested in flying," said Dan Dornseif, a flight instructor with the Santa Cruz Flying Club, based at Watsonville's airport. "We do get a lot of business from that."

Fellow flight instructor Thomas Gustafsson agreed: "It draws some attention to it that creates results afterwards — they get here and get all excited about these airplanes."

But last spring, it was quite a different story. At the peak of the season, all of the flying club's eight airplanes were grounded, driving business to a standstill for three months.

In the meantime, Dornseif and pilot Glen Marshall rented an airplane from San Jose to fill in until the planes were repaired one by one. For other pilots, repairs are still being made because orders backed up when a sudden demand of some 2,000 engines was made on a few manufacturers.

Airport manager Don French said at last count, all but 25 planes at Watsonville airport have been repaired.

"All in all, I think Chevron did a commendable job in dealing with a disastrous situation as best they could," said French. "They paid for people not flying, new engines (between \$10,000 and \$20,000), all kinds of things."

Dornseif also said that Chevron did "really well" in helping put his flying club back in the air. However, Dornseif said, he was not one of the pilots who was reimbursed for lost income, and estimates he lost about \$3,000 in wages.

"I actually went on vacation to Ha-



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

All seven of the Flying Club's planes were among the 156 damaged.

waii, and got back and found I had bills and no job," he said. "In a way, it's not worth my energy to be mad about it — it would be a long hard fight to get it back," he said.

But Gustafsson said he and other pilots operating other flight schools from Watsonville airport are fighting Chevron in small claims court to get their money back.

Chevron could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Despite the repairs, it has taken several months for business to rebound, Dornseif said.

"That's the big thing — coming back was kind of slow because everyone heard about (the fuel contamination) and it scared a few people," he said.

The Fly-In's biggest contribution, Dornseif said, is it gives him and other pilots a chance to remind the public of the safe record of air travel. Now added to the many pre-flight checks pilots make before flying is a test for possible fuel contamination. Pilots pour fuel on a rag to determine whether there's a lingering odor — a sign of the jet fuel responsible for contaminating the regular aircraft fuel supply.

"The Fly-In brings a lot of people in, brings in a lot of exposure," said Dorn-



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Flight instructor Dan Dornseif estimates he lost \$3,000 in wages.

seif. "How many times do you drive down a freeway and see a car crash, and how many times do you hear of a

plane crash? Most of the times it is pilot error — and that's why we're here, to teach people."