

'This is very serious stuff. You can't pull over to the curb at 10,000 feet.'

7-1-91

Airport grounded

Pilots fuming over bad fuel; class action suit filed

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SANTA CRUZ — A contaminated batch of fuel has grounded almost every airplane at Watsonville Airport and prompted a Santa Cruz attorney to file a class action lawsuit against Chevron Co.

"My airplane suffered engine damage. It put me at risk. Chevron has been grossly negligent," said attorney and pilot Richard Damon.

The contaminated fuel, which has damaged engines and could cause them to fail, was sold to about 1,500 pilots last month at small airports in Sacramento, Concord, Oakland and Watsonville. So far, 600 pilots have filed claims with Chevron, saying their engines were damaged by the gas.

At Watsonville Aviation, mechanic Charlie King has found engine damage related to contaminated fuel in 57 of the 60 engines he has inspected so far. Those planes are grounded awaiting approval for Chevron to do \$10,000 to \$20,000 worth of repairs. Barely anyone is taking off these days.

"This is a mad house," King said Thursday, as his shop overflowed with ailing planes.

"And this is deadsville," he added, waving at the airport's empty skies. "Since we've been finding things wrong, there's been hardly any airplanes flying."

Chevron spokesman Mike Libbey said Thursday his company plans to pay for any repairs and inspections related to the contaminated fuel, estimating they would cost about \$1 million.

"This isn't just about rebuilding some engines," said Libbey. "This gets to Chevron's reputation for delivering high-quality fuel. We have the highest market share in aviation fuel in Western states and we want our customers satisfied."

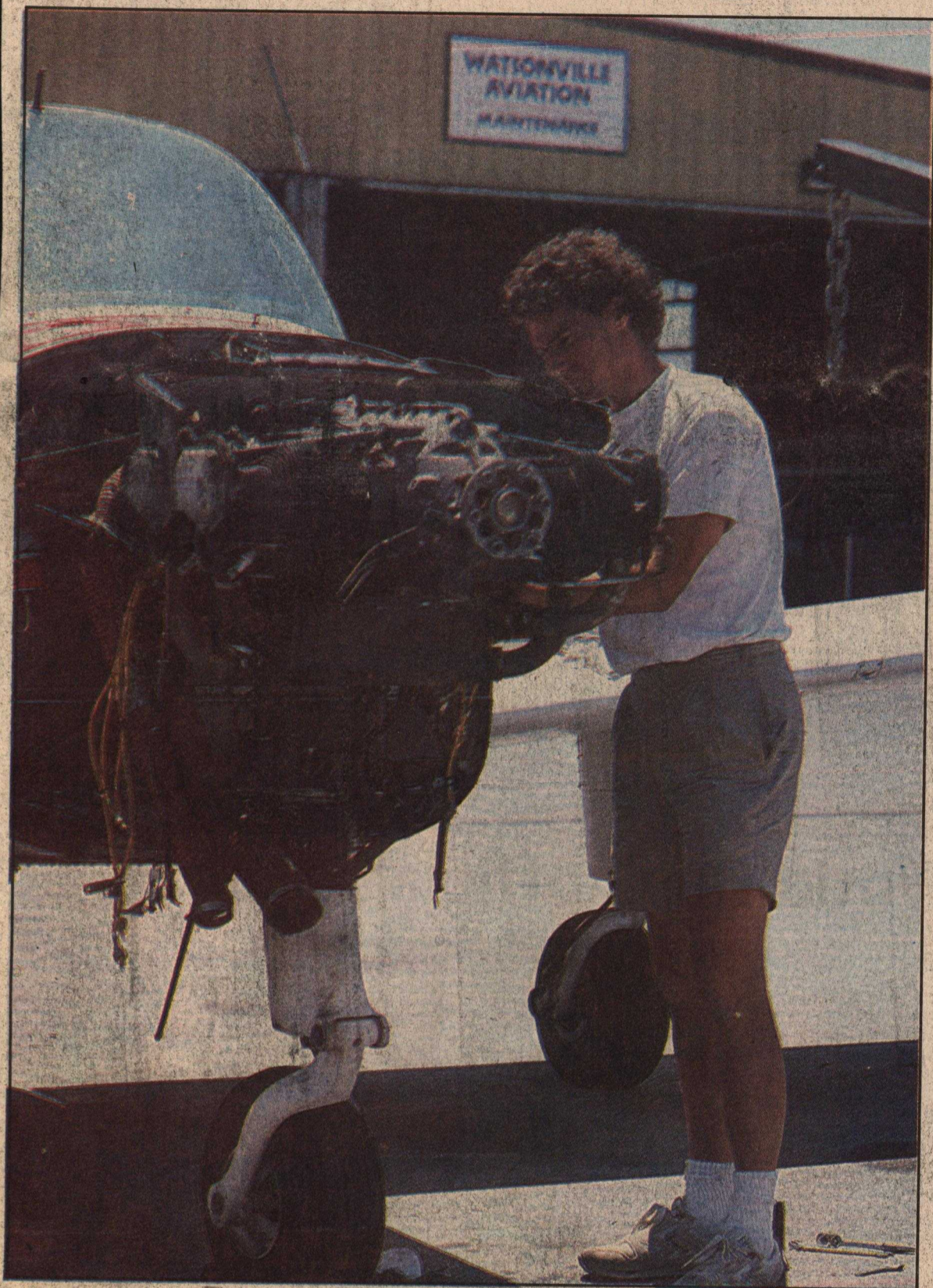
Libbey said Chevron also will pay for lost revenues of airplane businesses, like the flight school and biplane tours Paul King operates out of Watsonville Airport.

King's seven airplanes are damaged. He spent Thursday talking to insurance agents and filling out claim forms. He says it will take at least two months to get his business back in the air.

"I don't know the words to say what it's like to pay all these bills without an income," he said.

Libbey said that in mid-May, Chevron accidentally mixed high-octane jet fuel into low-octane aviation gasoline, used in small airplanes, to two airports in Sacramento. The half-empty fuel truck then refilled with good fuel at the Chevron refinery. The truck then carried contaminated, but now diluted, loads of fuel to small airports in Concord, Oakland and Watsonville.

The fuel that reached Watsonville was so diluted with good fuel that it couldn't cause serious engine problems, said Libbey.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Pilot Justin Bird works on his fuel-damaged airplane engine Thursday afternoon.

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Watsonville airport

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So far, tests of fuel samples sold at Watsonville Airport have borne out Libbey's claims. But engine examinations by local mechanics, and Chevron inspector James Irvin, who visited the airport this week, are finding a large number of damaged engines.

"We're just kind of standing here wondering. At this point we just don't know," said Watsonville Airport Manager Don French.

In French's office, four large cans of fuel samples are awaiting further testing.

The 12,000-gallon Chevron fuel tank at Watsonville Airport, which was filled with contaminated fuel May 17, still hasn't been drained. The tank has been close to empty and then refilled several times with good fuel. But traces of the contamination linger in the mix, which is discouraging pilots from filling up, and fueling concerns about its safety.

French says persistent rumors, and the possibility there could be a problem with the fuel, prompted him to ask Chevron Thursday to flush, replace filters and refill its fuel tank.

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The suit filed by Damon in Superior Court Thursday contends that Chevron was negligent when it mixed the fuel. Chevron said a leaky valve inadvertently blended the two. Damon was among the hundreds of pilots whose engines now need up to \$20,000 overhauls after their pistons, fuel lines and engine blocks were doused with the fouled fuel.

Chevron Corp. has issued warnings to all pilots through the media, and is using credit-card bills to track pilots who may have bought contaminated gas.

These people are being called and sent registered letters and mail-grams warning them to not fly until their engines are inspected by a mechanic. In the letters, Chevron promises to pay "reasonable costs" for the inspections and any engine damage related to the contaminated fuel.

These promises aren't enough for Damon.

In his suit, he alleges a cover-up by Chevron about the levels of contamination in the fuel and about how widely the fuel was distributed.

"Chevron's limited approach to the situation will cause financial loss, property damage, serious injury and even death to aircraft owners, operators, and unwitting passengers," Damon's suit said.

He's not the only pilot fuming about bad gas.

"The issue is that Chevron knew they had sold contaminated fuel, and didn't let us know," said Justin Bird of Prunedale, who was taking his engine apart at Watsonville Airport Thursday. "I flew over the mountains and put my life at risk. It was incredibly negligent."

"I'm afraid to fly my airplane," said Joe Robinson of Scotts Valley.