BLOWING SMOKE

Did a landfill explosion cause the Santiago Canyon Fire? Umm . . .
BY NICK SCHOU
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The smoking dump theory? Photo by Janine Kahn.

Three weeks after flames erupted near the intersection of Canyon and Silverado Canyon roads, the so-called Santia Fire is officially 100 percent contained. Meanwhile, a multi task force including the Orange County Fire Authority (OC California Department of Forestry, ATF and FBI are invest what—or more precisely, who—caused the fire.

Chris Conception, an OCFA battalion chief, refuses to prov "There are still leads coming in, although that's slowed dow says. "We are still investigating but don't have any suspec

The lack of progress in the arson investigation has caused one alternative—and highly inflammatory—theory to arise the origin of the fire: An inactive landfill located near the in of Santiago Canyon and Silverado Canyon roads may hav the fire. The source for this theory is an organization called Investigating Toxic Sites (PITS—nice one!), which has a p box in Boonville and a website, www.toxicsites.org.

According to its website, the group is conducting a "current investigation" into whether the fire was caused by the spo combustion of underground methane gas at the so-called Silverado Canyon Disposal Station No. 9, which sits below Christmas-tree farm on Irvine Co. property just north of Silverado Canyon Road and hasn't been operating since the

"Highly explosive and highly flammable methane gas is generated within landfills up to 100 years after closure," the T website states. "Did gases and fires within the closed dump cause the Santiago Canyon fire? Our investigation contir

Janice England, who runs the website, has posted numerous messages in various OC online chat rooms asking for a information leading to the arrest and eventual conviction of the Silverado Canyon dumpsite. "Most closed dumps gen explosive and highly flammable methane gas," England noted in one message posted at an Irvine Housing Forums w "Gases from Silverado Canyon Disposal Station No. 9 could have ignited the fire and fueled the flames. Does anyone information on the dumpsite?"

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In response to England's queries, many forum members ridiculed her. "It was an arsonist," one member responded. "

"Nixon did it," said another.

Not wanting to be scooped on such a hot story, and undeterred by such small-minded skeptics, the *Weekly* promptly own investigation.

First, we contacted OCFA officials and asked whether it was possible the fire started at the dumpsite, given that it is l the rough area where the fire reportedly ignited. But they told us that the actual origin of the fire was about a half-mile of the dumpsite. Conception insists the fire was started by an arsonist, but suspiciously, he refused to provide much "There were two points of origin," he said. "We are still actively investigating but don't have any suspects."

Intrigued, and sensing a cover-up, we called the Orange County Health Care Agency, which monitors the Silverado C dumpsite, and asked how the landfill fared during the fire. "Our environmental-health staff . . . had a person go out the the fire," said agency spokesman Howard Sutter. "There are no environmental-control measures at the site, so there monitoring wells present there. . . . That facility didn't sustain any damage."

No monitoring wells? Hmm, that sounds suspicious.

So we filed a California Public Records Act Request with the California Integrated Waste Management Board (CIWM demanded all inspection reports of the dumpsite in the past decade. As expected, they stonewalled us—for about 30 before e-mailing us dozens of inspection reports going back 10 years. The reports confirmed that there are no metha monitoring wells at the landfill because, as it turns out, there is no methane in the dumpsite that might catch fire. That unlike many solid-waste dumpsites that do generate methane, the Silverado Canyon site is a "burn dump," meaning t everything dumped there was burned before it was buried, and ashes don't generate methane.

The *Weekly* reached Janice England by phone and shared with her the results of our exhaustive probe. She still sus the Silverado Canyon dumpsite ignited the fire because the site-inspection reports fail to mention whether any metha were done, or if any tests were carried out to measure hazardous—and potentially flammable—chemicals in the soil.

"If testing hasn't been done, I think it should be done," England says. "There was a fire, and it started very near the d there are gases, they would migrate underground. It doesn't mean much just because [the ground] above the dump

England promised she'd continue to dig into the mystery and post her results at her website. Stay tuned to www.toxic updates on this hot story.

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