

Crying Fire

In the aftermath of the worst fire season in our State's history, some disgruntled parties (and that includes the editorial page of the local daily) are citing the need for funds for firefighting and other emergency services as a reason not to repeal the State's usurious car tax. This is nothing but an opportunist ploy.

If you turn to page 10 of this paper, you'll find an article by Rob Campbell about a Russian waterbomber, the Ilyushin-76, which can quell an area the size of 12 football fields with a single payload. The development of the Ilyushin is huge news; it's an invention with as much potential to save lives as the household fire extinguisher, the automotive seat belt, or the child car seat. Yet when Representatives Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) and Curt Weldon (R-PA) held a press conference last week to announce the Ilyushin's availability—its readiness to be deployed not in the future but right now, for this round of devastating fires, not a single major print news outlet carried the story. At times of crisis like this, news media do tend to shy away from anything that would give the appearance of being in poor taste, i.e., any story that neither a) lauds the firefighters in action, nor b) tugs at the reader's heartstrings by portraying the individual, anecdotal tragedies of the victims.

But saying hello! there's another, safer, way to fight fires, is not in any way a put-down of the work of firefighters, nor does it mean we don't have sympathy for the victims. Rather the opposite: we're angry on their behalf—angry that reluctant or greased bureaucrats would risk firefighters' lives when safer techniques are available, and angry that homeowners lost their property needlessly because protectionist bureaucrats beholden to special interests (government contractors, anyone?) refuse to allow new and improved technology with lifesaving potential to enter the controlled government-contract marketplace.

The media's failure to carry the Ilyushin story is deplorable, but so is the gleeful scavenger-hunt taking place in the aftermath of the fires, as homeowners and grieving families are turned into poster-children for Gray Davis' car tax. Headlines like the one printed on the front page of the Star on November 5, "Promise to rescind car tax could threaten safety funds" are nothing but a craven attempt at manipulating your sympathies at a time when you, the public, are emotionally vulnerable. Let's make this perfectly clear: The same politicians who refused to use the Ilyushin to fight the fire are the ones who want to triple your car tax in order to spend more money on conventional firefighting. This is a deeply hypocritical move. Don't fall for it.

When we first received a tip about what was going on with the Ilyushin, we were skeptical, thinking that there must in fact be a good reason this plane could not be deployed. Digging, we couldn't find one. But we're human, and that doesn't mean that a good reason doesn't exist. However, in the course of researching that story, we also came across another example of advanced firefighting technology that has been shelved for political reasons: Pyrocool gel. This gel, which quells fire and leaves behind a residue that is environmentally harmless, is, like the Ilyushin, ready for deployment. It

isn't being used, because the U.S. Forest Service is committed to using inferior, cyanide based products. As the saying goes, fool us once, shame on you, fool us twice, shame on us. In the end, we can only conclude that the problem lies not in the technology, but with a bureaucratic machine's inability to respond to change. Ask yourself, if an agency can't respond to change, how well can it really respond to crisis?