Protesters, police swap clash blame

Waste plan dispute led to 18 arrests

By Dave Downey
Tribune writer

PHOENIX — Sheriff's deputies and environmentalists, whose clash Monday night at a Mobile public hearing led to 18 arrests and accusations of police brutality, blamed each other Tuesday for the confrontation.

Greenpeace protest organizer Bradley Angel, who is from San Francisco and was one of those arrested, charged the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office launched a "premeditated attack" upon the protesters.

Gov. Rose Mofford's chief aide, meanwhile, condemned the "reprehensible treatment" of 18 people arrested during a public hearing on a proposed toxic-waste disposal site and said Tuesday that Mofford had agreed to meet with representatives of the group.

And the chairman of the House Environment Committee said he will ask the state Department of Environmental Quality to schedule another public hearing on the $50 million facility, which is being built by an Arkansas firm under a contract with the state.

Duane Brady, sheriff's office administrative assistant, said the protesters sought from the outset to derail the hearing, which was intended to give anyone who desired an opportunity to comment on the state's proposed hazardous-waste disposal plant.

Norm Weiss, waste programs director for the state DEQ, said the hearing succeeded in obtaining comments from 71 people but only after police intervened to restore order.

"Essentially, there was a screaming match the first 10 to 12 minutes," Weiss said. "It was our assessment that if action was not taken, we could

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not hold the public hearing."

He said other members of Greenpeace recently "shut down" a California public hearing on another sensitive environmental issue, and state officials were determined not to let that happen here.

However, in a news conference Tuesday after the noon release of protesters from the county's Madison Street Jail in Phoenix, activists charged police were overzealous in their attempt to control the crowd of about 250 at Mobile's tiny elementary school.

Angel said the 18 people were crammed into a van for three hours while deputies refused to open the windows, offer them drinks or let them out to relieve themselves.

"We were screaming for air," Angel said, adding, "None of us were ever read our rights."

Angel said seven people were shocked with stun guns used by deputies, and others were thrown to the ground.

Marlene Stephens, 26, of Phoenix lifted up the back of her shirt so reporters could see the dozen red spots on her back that she said were a result of being shocked many times.

"This was done to protect me," Stephens said, sarcastically.

Brady offered a different statement.

"One lieutenant was kicked in the head," Brady said. "He's got a big knot on the side of his head. We had others that were punched.

"Those people weren't there to listen to other people. That was an orchestrated event."

Brady maintained two people were stunned — not seven.

The Associated Press contributed information to this report.

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