

Breaking news, photos and video at www.santacruzsentinel.com

CREWS AT 'STANDOFF' WITH STUBBORN BLAZE

Fire + Fire Prevention - 2000

5-25-08

600 structures threatened

3,840 acres burned

35 percent contained

GOVERNOR DECLARES
EMERGENCY IN SANTA CLARA
COUNTY AFTER FIRE JUMPS LINE

BLAZE FINDS HEAVIER FUELS IN
UNDERBRUSH, COULD SMOLDER
FOR DAYS, OFFICIALS SAY



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Firefighters take up position on the Santa Clara side of Summit Road Saturday where the fire jumped the ridge into Santa Clara County earlier.

By **JENNIFER SQUIRES**

Sentinel staff writer

CORRALITOS — The Summit Fire turned into itself Saturday and was burning dense chaparral in steep ravines, but continued to threaten almost 600 structures.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger declared a state of emergency in Santa Clara County on Saturday after 50 homes there were evacuated when gusting winds pushed the fire toward the historic community of Svedal late Friday.

The blaze, which started in an empty lot near Summit Road early Thursday, was 35 percent contained late Saturday after consuming more than 3,840 acres in Santa Cruz and Santa Clara counties. Twenty homes and 11 outbuildings had been destroyed as of Saturday night.

Cal Fire officials said they don't know how long it will take to contain the fire.

"The fire's going to continue to be a slow, fuel-driven fire," Cal Fire Division Chief Dennis Mathisen said.

The flames moved into 10- and 100-hour fuels Saturday — bushes, trees and logs that could smolder and remain hot for days, according to Cal

Emergency contact information

EVACUATION INFORMATION: Evacuation facilities set up at Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds, 2601 E. Lake Ave., Watsonville. For evacuation assistance call 458-7195.

RED CROSS: Staging at Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds, 2601 E. Lake Ave., Watsonville.

VOLUNTEER: Volunteer Centers of Santa Cruz County, call 427-5070.

ANIMAL SERVICES: Santa Cruz Animal Services helping with large animal evacuations. For information, call 454-7303.

Fire Capt. Brad Hudson out of Nevada County.

"This was a wind-driven fire, but it's gotten into the heavier fuels," said Hudson, who was

See **FIRE** on **PAGE A20**



Ellen Isaacs and Alan Walendowski survey their destroyed home on Ormsby Cutoff Road for the first time Saturday with their dog Cassie.

Residents talk about rebuilding

By **JENNIFER SQUIRES**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

CORRALITOS — Poking through the smoldering remains of their Ormsby Cutoff Road house on Saturday afternoon, Alan Walendowski and Ellen Isaacs found one good omen.

A T-shirt with the message "We're not dead yet."

They laughed that the old shirt, a remnant from a tech company project Walendowski had worked on, survived when flames from the Summit Fire tore through their house Thursday morning. The couple fled with their dog, Cassie, when the fire reached their propane tank.

But they also saw the shirt as a sign to return and rebuild on

the now-charred piece of land. Walendowski and Isaacs made their first trip back to their property around noon Saturday when the Sheriff's Office shuttled evacuated residents from the Corralitos Fire Station into the fire zone in 15-passenger vans. The couple and several other Ormsby residents rode

See **REBUILD** on **PAGE A11**

Fire highlights prevention quandaries, severe conditions

By **KURTIS ALEXANDER**
SENTINEL STAFF REPORT

Two and a half years ago, Kline Gidcumb left his ridgetop home in Lompico for a place in the lower reaches of the San Lorenzo Valley, in part, to reduce his exposure to wild-fire.

"There was just no protection up there," said the 66-year-old resident, whose two decades in the Santa Cruz Mountains have familiarized him with the taste of smoke and given him the wherewithal to know that a fire truck would not easily reach the steep, remote region of the range where he had lived.

But by buying a house near Ben Lomond, which he says is the closest he wants to get to town, Gidcumb is still taking a gamble.

He remains, like thousands of others who make their home in the Santa Cruz Mountains, in wildfire country, and this year the risks are likely to be

higher.

Fire season has arrived early and the conditions that are fueling the Summit Fire, which has so far burned 3,840 acres and destroyed 20 homes, are similar elsewhere — decades of accumulated vegetation dried out

See **PREVENT** on **PAGE A11**

Is your home in a fire hazard zone?

Cal Fire and the UC Berkeley Center for Fire Research and Outreach offer a searchable database, by address, to assess the severity of the fire hazard on your property, at <http://firecenter.berkeley.edu/fhsz>.

Prevent

Continued from Page A1

by a lack of late-winter rains this year.

"It's exactly the same in other parts of the county," said John Ferreira, the state Cal Fire unit chief responsible for firefighting efforts in Santa Cruz County.

Fire authorities agree that the conditions of the mountains, underscored by the imperfect practice of fire prevention, has left the region in a precarious state.

A 2007 Cal Fire report on fire hazard identified most of the county in the two most severe categories, "high" or "very high."

Assuring ample protection

Ferreira, who supervises fire protection in both Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties, says the region is adequately equipped and staffed to handle the threat.

The unusually fast-spreading Summit Fire was initially tough to head off, but fire officials say the wind — not a shortage of personnel or equipment — is to blame.

Even before the Summit Fire started, Santa Cruz County had begun receiving summer staffing reinforcements from the state. Dry conditions and early season fires in Southern California had prompted the deployment in early May, instead of June when extra personnel normally arrive.

Before that, the number of firefighters had been lower than usual. A county tax initiative last fall that would have raised money to maintain state-recommended levels of staffing during winter months failed to win the support of voters.

When peak season arrives, though, the state picks up firefighting responsibilities and the bill, as it has now. So far, the Summit Fire has cost \$3.2 million.

State firefighters are currently manning seven stations in Santa Cruz County, with a force of 28 at any given time, and running a youth camp on Empire Grade with 75 additional hands. That's on top of the 50 or so firefighters stationed in the local communities, according to Cal Fire.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Friday made an appearance at the Gilroy base camp for the Summit Fire to reassure residents that they have all they need to keep them safe, pledging even more firefighters, trucks and air support this year.

The governor and his staff acknowledged the coming months could be difficult.

Reducing the fire risk

Fire records show that little of the Santa Cruz Mountains has burned over the last century. That's left the usually rain-soaked vegetation to grow unchecked and, should things get really dry as they've begun to do, increasingly dangerous.

The National Weather Service in Monterey Bay estimates that rainfall is at least 20 percent below what it normally is this time of year. And fire officials say the hills look more like October than May.

"The brush started to turn earlier than we had thought," said Daniel Berlant, a spokesman for Cal Fire in Sacramento.

While state firefighters rely on prescribed burns and forest thinning to reduce the hazard of fire, these practices are reserved mostly for public lands, and the bulk of the Santa Cruz Mountains is privately held. Private

land owners are required to clear brush 100 feet from their homes, but fire officials concede the law is not adequately enforced, and many say it's simply insufficient.

"It'd be nice to have the private property owners participate more," said Grey Hayes, a botanist with the Elkhorn Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve who has studied the overgrown scrub and forests in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Hayes floats the idea of having community members establish fire safety councils. These groups would spearhead large-scale prevention practices on private lands, like clearing undergrowth and establishing fire breaks.

But Hayes is the first to acknowledge that the concept, which has caught on in varying degrees in some parts of the state, can be expensive, if not impractical.

The difficulty maintaining a comprehensive fire prevention strategy is not lost on the residents who live in the mountains.

"There isn't an easy solution," said Gidcumb, the Ben Lomond resident who is no stranger to fire.

Just Thursday, a 15-acre blaze broke out less than a quarter mile from his home near Quail Hollow Ranch County Park. His neighbors had begun to pack their cars to evacuate when firefighting planes from the nearby Summit Fire doused the blaze.

"I realize you can't have the government clear all the underbrush around here and the warnings haven't been sufficient for property owners to clear," Gidcumb said.

"But I like it up here," he said, "and you're probably not going to get me to move."

Contact Kurtis Alexander at 706-3267 or kalexander@santacruzsentinel.com.

Rebuild

Continued from Page A1

up the private road together to see the devastation. All of their homes had been destroyed.

Vans also took residents to Dove Lane and Buzzard Lagoon Road.

"We understand the need to know or not know," Cal Fire spokeswoman Es Berliner said.

The fire had consumed 20 houses and 17 outbuildings as of Saturday. Almost 600 structures, most of them homes, remained threatened and hundreds of families are still under mandatory evacuations.

Saturday was the first day residents living in the mandatory evacuation zone were allowed back to see their property, though several had slipped through roadblocks Friday to check on their homes.

"Some [people] were crying and pretty upset, and understandably so," sheriff's Sgt. Fred Plageman said.

There was also a scare for one vanload of residents checking in on their homes.

"They had a flare-up on upper Buzzard Lagoon while they were on upper Buzzard Lagoon," Plageman said.

Grief counselors and the Sheriff's Office chaplain were available for residents to speak with, and the local chapter of the American Red Cross is offering vouchers for three free counseling sessions to those who lost their homes.

On Ormsby, the only area completely decimated by the Summit Fire, it seemed residents tried to find bright spots and even talked about rebuilding.

"We'll have to figure it out," Isaacs said, explaining they would rent a place for at least a year while they make plans.

Walendowski said they hoped to rebuild, wondering aloud if he could add a pond down the slope the cement pad where his house had stood.

"It's kind of interesting to see the lay of the land," he said. Before the fire, the dense forest of manzanita and pine trees had concealed the terrain.

Walendowski bought the house in 1996 and the couple was in the midst of a remodeling project — a new bathtub sat in front of the house when the fire broke out and two toilets and some windows are on order.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Kenny Rich shows his son Joey the cow bell to his drum set he found in the smoldering ruins of his Ormsby Cutoff home.

They joked that at least they'd have something to start with.

Cassie, their dog, also seemed anxious to move forward. She whimpered and walked in circles in the driveway looking for a cushy bed to lay on or a carpet runner to stand on. The 5-year-old dog, a rescue with health problems that make her feet tender, could only find a soft bit of sand that washed into the driveway when the fire exploded a plastic water tank.

"That's the saddest thing ever. She's looking for the house," Walendowski said. "How do you explain to your dog that the house is gone?"

Across the single-lane road and down the hill a bit, the Rich family examined the foundation of their house to see if it would be sturdy enough to build on again. Some parts looked OK, but at least one section of concrete peeled up when Kathy Rich, whose father Ben Adams built the house, poked at it with a gardening tool.

Rich, her husband Kenny and their son Joey lived in the two-story house with a big deck and garage when the Summit Fire raged down the hill Thursday. As they drove back up the road Saturday, the family chanted "Rebuild! Rebuild!"

"It's like a fresh start," Kenny Rich said. They searched some areas of the rubble for possessions that survived the flames, but didn't find much. Joey recovered a ceramic dish and his dad found a cowbell that had been part of a drum set. A statue of a milkmaid that sat in front of the garage was slightly blackened, but still standing.

"It's not as bad as we thought it would be," Kathy Rich said.

With a touch of black humor, the family joked that at least the brush around the house is cleared now. A stack of firewood, ironically, and a small tractor appeared to be the only items that escaped the flames unscathed.

Ben Adams, who had used the tractor to clear the land before the house was built, quietly walked the property, snapping photos with a disposable camera. Despite his daughter's optimism, he said he wasn't sure he could build another house there.

"I don't know. I honestly don't know," Adams said. "It's almost like starting over from scratch."

Contact Jennifer Squires at 429-2449 or jsquires@santacruzsentinel.com.

When you buy our fine products, you support

"Save Our Surf"

A Partnership For the Beaches And Our Coast

The Save Our Surf campaign, one of Santa Cruz County's best business-environmental partnerships, starts its 13th summer season Memorial Day weekend. Since the summer of 1996, Budweiser, Bud Light and Couch Distributing have pledged a percentage of sales between Memorial Day and Labor Day to Surfrider Foundation, Santa Cruz Chapter. Through this campaign, our customers have raised \$10,000 or more for the nonprofit group every summer. The Save Our Surf partnership has promoted clean water and beaches by allowing the all-volunteer Surfrider to engage in education, activism and outreach.

CLEAN BEACHES: More than 200 volunteers picked up trash and recyclables at a Surfrider-sponsored Earth Day cleanup at Cowell Beach in April.

The alliance helps Surfrider fulfill its mission in the following ways:

- Storm Drain Stenciling:** To bring attention to the connection between sewers and their outflow to the ocean, Surfrider volunteers stencil storm drains with the warning, "No Dumping — Drains to Bay." Stenciling is done monthly, weather permitting.
- Water Quality Testing:** Surfrider conducts an average of a dozen water quality tests at beaches and posts results on its web site.

SUMMIT FIRE



Firefighters keep an eye on a flare-up moving toward Summit Road where earlier the fire jumped the ridge into Santa Clara County.



RIGHT: In a twist of cruel irony, the home



RIGHT: In a twist of cruel irony, the home of Kathy Rich was destroyed by the fire, while the stack of firewood went untouched.



ABOVE: Fire displaced residents check the progress of the fire on a map in Corralitos on Saturday.



LEFT: Fire crew moves into a defensive position along Summit Road where earlier the fire jumped into Santa Clara County.



ABOVE: Kathy Rich hands her husband Kenny a piece of their lives she dug from the rubble of their Ormsby Cutoff home. Her father Ben Adams, second from left, built the home. Chris Adams, third from left, also lived in the home at one time.



ABOVE: Ellen Isaacs and Alan Walendowski see their destroyed home on Ormsby Cutoff for the first time Saturday with their dog Cassie.

Photos by DAN COYRO
Sentinel photographer