

'I don't have anything anymore'

Fire & Fire Prevention - 2008

Residents assess losses after blaze

By JENNIFER SQUIRES
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

LARKIN VALLEY — Russell Begley sat on a dry grass-covered embankment near Buena Vista Drive and Highway 1 on Saturday afternoon waiting for firefighters to control the Trabing Fire so he could return to his family's property.

Begley, 47, is fairly certain there's nothing left of the three homes he, his mother, brother, sister and their children shared on Trabing Road.

Begley's family is one of many that lost everything in the fast-moving Trabing Fire on Friday night. Although Cal Fire has yet to release an official count of homes and outbuildings destroyed, at least 15 structures are believed lost in the blaze.

Begley said he had a bad feeling from the start.

"I saw the smoke from work and I hauled ass up there," said Begley, who works in Pajaro.

Roadblocks stopped him twice, so he went to Aromas to stay with a friend. There, he saw his house burning on the evening news. That sight quashed his hopes that his fish and three cats survived.

"Mine's gone," he said. "I saw it on TV last night."

So he phoned his family — most of them are in Southern California for a wedding this weekend — to deliver the bad news.

"I just had to call them and tell them the whole place is gone," Begley said.

Still, he waited at a roadblock Saturday afternoon. He'd like to walk through the property that his parents bought in 1971. Maybe his grandfather's Colt or several pistols passed down through the family didn't melt. They were in a safe, he said with a bit of optimism. Then the man sitting next to him on the grass tossed in his two cents: those fire-proof safes, everything incinerates inside them, he told Begley.

"I don't have anything anymore," conceded Begley, who was dirty and unshaven. "I was



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

The chimney is all that remains of a Larkin Valley Road home consumed Friday by the Trabing Fire.

Lightning delays containment

By GENEVIEVE BOOKWALTER
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

LARKIN VALLEY — Thunderstorms sparked 14 small wildfires in the Santa Cruz Mountains on Saturday afternoon, holding up efforts to completely contain the 630-acre Trabing Fire east of Highway 1 and closing Hecker Pass on Highway 152.

None of the newest fires in Santa Cruz County caused major damage and all were contained within hours, according to Cal Fire officials.

Because firefighters were diverted to fight the lightning fires, the Trabing Fire, which broke out Friday afternoon, remained about 90 percent con-

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■ Dozens of animals killed in Trabing Fire, officials say.
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tained late Saturday, said Cal Fire spokesman Paul Van Gerwen. It is expected to be fully contained this evening.

"We used all our folks to pick up four or five lightning starts in the general area of the Trabing Fire," Van Gerwen said.

The blazes were a small part of a large number of lightning bolts that struck Northern California on Saturday, including at least five in Santa Clara County and more than 75 in the northeast corner of California.

Lightning-sparked flames east of Mount Madonna Park closed Hecker Pass late Saturday afternoon.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger ordered National Guard troops to help fight flames around the state.

Meanwhile, some of the first residents evacuated from the Trabing Fire on Friday were allowed to return to their homes. Joe Amaral, who lives on Larkin Valley Road, was in awe that firefighters had time to clear a wide fire break around his home before the flames arrived, saving his house.

When Amaral left Friday, "it must have been raining



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Smoke billows around a Yellow Brick Road home as a lightning strike-ignited fire burns near the site of Trabing Fire on Saturday.

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Fire

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Pompeii," he said, referring to the volcano that destroyed the Roman town in 79 A.D.

He returned to find flames had touched the fresh dirt ring that a bulldozer scraped around his home, but the house was fine.

While some residents were allowed back to their homes Saturday, the rest who were in the direct fire zone should be able to return at 7 a.m. today, according to Cal Fire. Those residents must show identification and proof of residency to get in. No visitors or public traffic will be allowed, and county sheriff's deputies will patrol the area. Power and water might not be back on, Cal Fire said.

The Trabling Fire began Friday afternoon and the first 911 calls came from someone who witnessed a motorist setting spot fires at four or five areas along the freeway, about 20 feet apart, according to emergency dispatchers.

Those small fires erupted into hundreds of acres of flames within hours. Fire raced up hill-sides, giving residents little time to collect their belongings and get out. Animals were trapped with no way to escape. About 2,000 people were evacuated at the height of the fire.

It was the third fire to ignite in the county in a month. On May 22, a fire broke out on Summit Road and Maymens Flat above Corralitos, torching 4,270 acres and destroying 35 homes and 64 outbuildings. The cost of fighting that fire totaled \$16 million. And, on June 11, a 520-acre blaze in Bonny Doon destroyed three homes and eight outbuildings, costing the state \$5 million to extinguish.

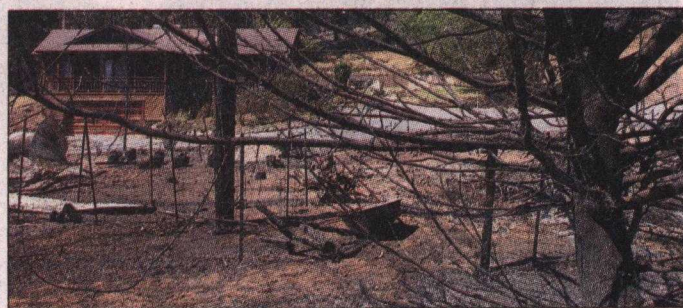
A reliable source close to the Trabling Fire on Friday said someone had been detained in connection with the blaze, but fire officials would not confirm that information Saturday. Nor would they confirm the cause of the fire, other than that it sparked on the side of the highway. No new information about the cause of the fire was available Saturday.

Meanwhile, county residents searching for KPIG on the dial Saturday had to wait to hear their favorite Americana music, as the Freedom radio station's broadcasting tower, which is near Hecker Pass, was knocked



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Firefighters continue to douse Trabling Fire hot spots Saturday morning.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A Larkin Valley Road home stands undamaged Saturday just yards from an area consumed by the Trabling Fire.

out of commission about 2 p.m. by a nearby lightning strike.

KPIG DJ Warren "The New Guy" Sampson said Saturday afternoon that he did not have any idea when the station would once again be heard at 107.5 FM, but it is still available online and on various radio frequencies in other parts of the state.

Until those original dial numbers are back on the air, Sampson said, "it's just phone calls, phone calls. 'Where's the Pig?'"

In Santa Cruz, Parks Department officials indefinitely closed all of open spaces Friday afternoon for fear of fire. Firefighters battled 60 small fires in the city's open spaces in 2007, said

Chief Park Ranger John Wallace.

The preventative effort means people cannot access the Pogonip, Arana Gulch, Moore Creek, Neary Lagoon, the DeLaveaga Park trails and the disc golf course at DeLaveaga until further notice, Wallace said.

"We're just going to be really cautious," Wallace said. "You just can't realize how much dry fuel is out there right now."

Those caught entering the closed areas could be fined more than \$100. The closures will remain "until we have a rain shower or the fog rolls in," Wallace said. The sprinkle that Santa Cruz received Saturday afternoon, he said, was not enough.

Sentinel staff writer Jennifer Squires and The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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At A Glance

ACRES BURNED: 630.

CONTAINED: 90 percent contained Saturday night; full containment expected 8 p.m. today.

STRUCTURES DESTROYED: Estimated 15.

EVACUATIONS: 2,000 ordered at height of the fire. Evacuation is expected to be lifted for residents at 7 a.m. today.

SHELTER: Call the American Red Cross Santa Cruz County Chapter at 462-2881.

CAUSE: Initial reports indicate that the fires may have been started intentionally by a motorcyclist heading north on Highway 1. The cause remains under investigation.

INJURIES: Two minor injuries to firefighters.

FIRE STARTED: Along Highway 1 in the Larkin Valley area.

ROAD CLOSURES: Larkin Valley Road at Peaceful Oaks Lane; Buena Vista Drive at Highway 1; Buena Vista Drive at Larkin Valley Road; Highway 152 at Casserly Road.

EVACUATION INFORMATION: Residents should contact Cal Fire at 335-6717 or 335-6718 for information on whether their homes are in an evacuation area.

ANIMAL EVACUATIONS: People needing assistance moving livestock or sheltering pets should call 454-7303 and press 1. Donations of grass hay or shavings for animal bedding can be brought to the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds in Watsonville. Monetary donations and gas cards for volunteer rescuers are also appreciated. Call 535-2181.



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

An exhausted Vickie Schillinger rode out Friday's fire in her Larkin Valley home to stay close to her horses.

Losses

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in my work clothes. I don't have any clean clothes."

Several homes on Trabing Road went up in flames Friday afternoon. The sound of exploding propane tanks punctuated the crackle of flames. Even Saturday morning, a plastic storage shed adjacent to one destroyed home sent up a dark plume of smoke as it burned.

Over the ridge on Larkin Valley Road, the fire burned so hot, it melted a Jeep.

Three-man fire crews went up and down long driveways Saturday morning dousing the dry and burned grasses, an effort to prevent the already-volatile fuels from catching fire during the morning's extreme heat.

The Trabing Fire jumped and spotted across the hillside meadows of Larkin Valley. Blackened fields, the brown of dry grass and groves of green trees alternated across the landscape Saturday. Smoke still emitted from some burned areas and the rubble of houses lost to the blaze smoldered. The ashen, charred ground crunched underfoot like day-old snow.

Although the threat of fire was essentially gone Saturday, residents who found their way inside the fire line were shaken.

"It looked like a volcano coming down the hill... It was so fast and nobody knew," said Vickie Schillinger, who lives on Larkin Valley with her husband, Tony, their kids, three dogs and six horses.

The Schillingers were among the lucky ones.

"Look at these people — there was nothing we could do to help them," Vickie Schillinger said. "Why we didn't lose ours, I don't

know."

Most of the pasture land around their gray, one-story home on the west-facing slope was blackened, but their house stood unscathed Saturday morning. Their family and animals are all safe, though the horses were a bit thirsty — with the power out, the water pump wasn't working.

Schillinger, a member of the county equine rescue team, helped get horses out when the Martin Fire erupted in Bonny Doon earlier this month. She didn't imagine her farm would be next.

She was home with her grandchildren — they were playing on a Slip 'N Slide — when smoke and flames started rolling over the eucalyptus-covered ridge Friday afternoon. Schillinger loaded kids and dogs into the truck and hooked up the horse trailer, but it only holds two animals.

Not knowing what to do, she drove the kids and dogs to her mother-in-law's house, then went back. As a member of the equine rescue team, she could get back inside the fire line. There, her husband, son and some people they didn't know defended the property with hoses until the electricity went out. Then they used a five-gallon bucket. They put all the horses in the same pasture, where the animals remained Saturday.

She credits the horses for saving the home — they ate the pastures near the house down so far there wasn't much left to burn. She said they hadn't considered the fire danger when they bought their place three years ago.

"You don't think about things like that. If you do, you don't live here," Schillinger said.

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

TRABING FIRE



Horses belonging to Vickie Schillinger graze on their patch of green between a pair of burned areas along Larkin Valley Road Saturday.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Nikki Harding tempts her horse with an apple before transporting it home to Larkin Valley Saturday at the fairgrounds.





Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Larkin Valley resident Joe Amaral chats with fire fighters who helped defend his home against Friday's fire Saturday morning.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A fire crew pours water on a smoldering tree near a Larkin Valley Road home.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A Jeep sits twisted and melted at a Larkin Valley Road home destroyed in the Trabing Fire.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A California Department of Corrections crew is dwarfed by the rising smoke of a fire caused by a lightning strike below Yellow Brick Road on Saturday.