

LOCKHEED FIRE: ONE YEAR LATER

CAUSE AND EFFECT



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Barbara McCrary on Wednesday walks a steep trail on her Swanton View Road ranch, where the devastation caused by a massive wildfire last year still can be seen.

Cal Fire knows who started 2009 wildfire but probe continues; landowners say massive blaze did some good

Fire & Fire Prevention - 200
By JENNIFER SQUIRES

jsquires@santacruzsentinel.com

SWANTON — A year after the Lockheed Fire scorched nearly 8,000 forested acres outside of Davenport, the land is recovering and Cal Fire officials are sorting out how to proceed with the investigation.

The massive wildland blaze was sparked by an unattended fire on private property off Lehi Road, a gated dirt road that traces the ridgeline of the coastal hills.

Within hours, flames were roiling through the crowns of old-growth redwoods and stands of Douglas fir and knobcone pine. Although the wildfire — the largest in the county in more than 20 years — didn't burn any homes,

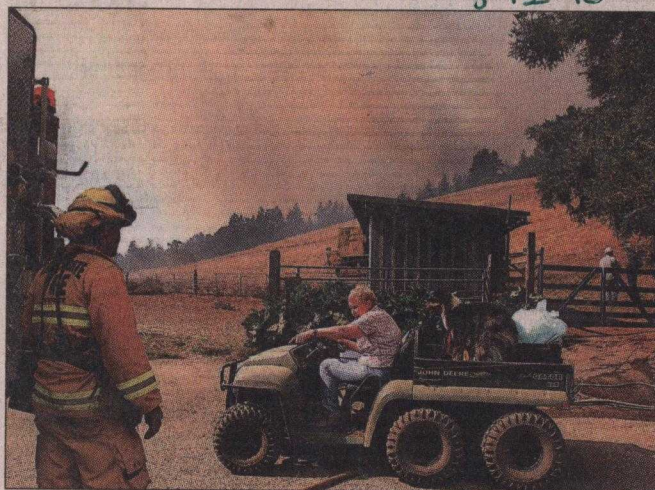
13 structures, several vehicles and miles of fence line were destroyed.

Cal Fire officials believe they know who was responsible for the unattended fire, but have not disclosed that person's identity.

There also has been no decision whether to take legal action against the alleged fire-starter, either criminal or civil, according to Cal Fire spokesman Daniel Berlant.

"We have to do our due diligence," he said.

However, there is a two-year statute of limitations on filing a civil action, which would seek reimbursement for firefighting costs, Berlant noted.



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL FILE

Barbara McCrary works to keep her animals safe as a Cal Fire helicopter drops water on the Lockheed Fire as it approaches her house on Aug. 13, 2009. The flames never reached the home.

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'It blows our minds how much has recovered in less than a year.'

MATT DAVIS, Big Creek Lumber forester

MORE INSIDE

North Coast community's roots stronger after fire, B1

FIRE

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While Cal Fire officials review the investigation and tally the exact cost of fighting the wildfire, a necessity if a civil action is to be filed against the alleged fire-starter, the forest and people affected by the fire are moving forward.

Last year, Lud and Barbara McCrary watched as fire tore through much of their 250-acre forested ranch. They nearly lost the Swanton View Road home they've lived in for almost six decades.

But this week, the long-time Swanton couple saw the upside of the wildfire.

The blaze had provided an endless supply of firewood at the McCrarys home, and Barbara was hoping for a bumper crop of wild blackberries this fall or next summer.

"The fire wasn't so bad," she said. "It cleared out a lot of brush. ... We accumulated more pasture."

A steep slope previously thick with manzanita at the McCrary ranch is now a sea of green dotted with the blossoms of yellow bush poppies, Barbara's favorite. Knobcone pine starts sprouted from seeds released by fire-sensitive cones and bright green redwood saplings could be seen growing at the foot of dead trees.

"Everything up on these ridges came back almost instantly," Lud McCrary said, gesturing toward the Big Creek drainage from a horse trail at his ranch.

What the McCrarys are seeing is occurring across the burned region.

"The ecological response to the fire was quite rapid really," said Matt Davis, a forester with Big Creek Lumber, the North Coast logging company run by Lud and his brother Bud. "Within days we were seeing insects, ants and beetles. ... It blows our minds how much has recovered in less than a year."



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL FILE

The hills above Swanton Road glow as the Lockheed Fire rages shortly after it was reported on Aug. 12, 2009. Cal Fire investigators say they know who started the wildfire, which was triggered by a small, unattended fire on private property, but have yet to decide whether to pursue criminal, civil or any charges.

AT A GLANCE LOCKHEED FIRE

ACRES BURNING: 7,718

STARTED: 7:15 p.m. Aug. 12, 2009

CONTAINED: Aug. 23, 2009

LOCATION: Bonny Doon area, Smith Creek drainage

CAUSE: An unattended fire on a Lehi Road property spread into the wildland. Investigators say they know who lit that fire.

STRUCTURES DESTROYED: No houses, but 13 structures, three vehicles and two travel trailers were destroyed.

FIRE CREWS: More than 2,000 firefighters battled the blaze.

COST: \$26.2 million

SOURCE: Cal Fire



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Lud and Barbara McCrary stop on Wednesday to admire a redwood grove on their ranch, which was scorched in last year's Lockheed Fire.



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Lud McCrary on Wednesday checks a trail on his Swanton View Road property where he and his wife, Barbara, replaced fences that were destroyed by the Lockheed Fire last August.

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The Santa Cruz Mountains area charred by the Lockheed Fire hadn't burned since the infamous Pine Mountain Fire in 1948, which Lud McCrary helped fight.

"It's typical after these fires. It's coming back very strong. You can see redwood sprouts that are 3, 4 feet tall in some areas," said Cal Fire Division Chief Rich Sampson. "It looks like a putting green with all the knobcone pine coming up."

But the fire also created ample work for those whose properties burned. Fences had to be rebuilt and water tanks and pipes replaced.

Across the mountainous area, firefighters battling the Lockheed Fire resurrected old fire roads, according to Sampson.

"It'll make it a lot easier to keep these fires from getting so big," he said.

The McCrarys, meanwhile, planted thousands of redwood saplings across their land — they will take about 60 years to mature — and sowed 900 pounds of rye grass seed into their hilly pastures this past winter, creating golden fields for their cattle to snack on this summer.

Big Creek Lumber used helicopters to salvage-log redwoods from the nearly 2,000 acres of company land that burned. Big Creek crews also salvaged timber from Cal Poly Swanton Pacific Ranch, the Cemex property and from some smaller, privately owned parcels, Lud McCrary said.

Concerns about erosion caused by heavy rain during winter storms didn't come to fruition and the threat of fire has diminished substantially because of the foggy, damp summer.

Unlike the two previous years, out-of-control wildfires that threatened and destroyed homes have not sparked this year, something Cal Fire officials attribute to low temperatures, high moisture levels and cool breezes.

"We haven't had the large fires," Sampson said. "We definitely have a very different fire season."

Still, Swanton residents said they don't think they're out of the woods. They wonder how neighbors are managing their timberland and are aware there is more forest that could burn.

"There's so much fuel left," Lud McCrary said. "It kind of worries me, if we had a real dry northeast wind, we could still have a fire."

Staff writer Alia Wilson contributed to this report.