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Illegal burn starts fire, scares students

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WATSONVILLE — A fire started by an illegal burn behind a Hughs Road home Tuesday gave a good scare to students at nearby Salsipuedes Elementary School before it was contained.

"It did look like, from where I was standing, that it was our school on fire," said Salsipuedes Principal Marilyn Frandeen, who was alerted to the fire by alarmed students. "There was a lot of black smoke and huge orange flames — it was really close to the school."

The Hughs Road fire, started by residents in their backyard, was fueled by a couch, mattresses and carpeting, said Fire Capt. Dennis

King of the Pajaro Valley Fire Station on Casserly Road. Luckily, it didn't spread beyond the burning pile, he said. People starting illegal burns can be fined up to \$1,000.

Unlike Tuesday's incident, many fires started by residents who burn tires and other illegal materials behind their homes burn out of control, King said.

The rule for legal backyard burns in the unincorporated areas of the county — allowed between Dec. 1 and April 30 — is simple, said King.

"If it grows on your property, you can burn it," King said.

Residents planning to burn backyard waste should pick up a burn permit at their local fire district, where they will be given informa-

tion on how to do a legal burn. Backyard burns are prohibited in some unincorporated areas such as Aptos and La Selva Beach, said King.

Sometimes legal burns are prohibited during the five-month period because pollution levels are judged too high by the Monterey Bay Unified Air Control District, King said.

For more information, call the Monterey Bay Unified Air Control District at 1-800-225-2876.