

Storm waters rising

San Lorenzo River swells; car slides into Salsi Creek

By JOHN ROBINSON
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The San Lorenzo River swelled with brown water and broken trees. Landslides surged across roads and puddles were everywhere.

And still the rain kept falling, all day Friday and into the night, with the worst forecast for around midnight.

"We're getting our things ready and the cars out," said Evelyn Lynch who lives along the river in Felton.

"The river is about a foot from going over."

At 7 p.m. the San Lorenzo River was cresting near flood stage near Felton and according to the National Weather Service, up to four more inches of rain could fall in the mountains by this morning.

All across the county trees fell, streets flooded and mudslides threatened homes. Slides were reported from Boulder Creek to Seacliff Beach, as well as in the Watsonville area. Closed roads were numerous and the potential for more serious slides dangerous enough that the California Highway Patrol began escorting cars over the Highway 17 summit.

In the South County rescuers were searching late Friday night for a passenger in a car which slid off Whiting Road and sank in Salsipuedes Creek around 9:45 p.m.

Salsipuedes Fire Chief Ron Hart said he was checking the stream level when he saw a silver Hyundai come speeding down the road, hit some water, spin around and slide off the road into the creek.

Hart said the car began floating away.

■ *Southern California
gets respite — Page A3*

Please see STORM — A19

Storm

Continued from Page A1

"We could hear someone screaming for help," Hart said.

The driver of the car managed to get on top of the car, Hart said, and two firefighters eventually swam out with ropes and pulled the driver ashore.

The driver, however, told firefighters a second man had been in the car and had tried to swim to shore. The creek was flowing about 50 feet wide and 10 feet deep, according to firefighters.

A search by divers, fire fighters and State Parks lifeguards in an inflatable boat failed to find the second man. The driver of the car said he thought the passenger had reached shore, but was unsure.

Divers kept searching as precautionary measure. The car driver, identified as Emigdio Perez Fernandez, 30, of Alviso, was arrested by CHP officers on suspicion of drunken driving.

By dark Friday nearly four inches of rain had fallen in Boulder Creek and a third of an inch in Santa Cruz, with downpours continuing.

The threat of floods was serious enough for the Red Cross to open a pre-disaster emergency evacuation center at St. John's Church in Felton.

According to the National Weather Service, Friday's rains were spun off a major storm system slowly coming ashore in Oregon. The peak of the rain was to hit in the Big Sur Mountains during the night and should be lessening by this morning.

Paul Hamilton, a weather service forecaster, said showers should linger through Sunday, then taper off as a high pressure system begins to build. He would not guarantee that scenario, though.

"A lot of moisture from the Hawaiian Islands appears to have entered into this system, but it should stay south of the (Monterey) bay area," Hamilton said. "Right now, Sunday looks like the end of it for a while and we should be in a little drier period as a high pressure system begins to form."

The rains of recent days have been heavier than forecasters expected, Hamilton said, and the weather picture could change again if the high pressure fails to develop.

In the last week close to 14 inches of rain have

fallen in the Santa Cruz Mountains, saturating the ground. In Ben Lomond rainfall on Feb. 7 was 22.9 inches. As of 6 p.m. Friday it was 37.1 inches. Flooding was also a problem in the low lying and urban areas, including Capitola, where water was coming over the curbs of flooded streets and lapping at the doors of sand-bagged businesses by 9 p.m. A number of businesses that were flooded Wednesday had just started drying out.

In Soquel, fire officials warned some trailer park residents to be ready to evacuate should Soquel Creek rise to a dangerous level.

On Catalpa Street, off Water Street, a row of old cottonwood trees began to tilt and fall Friday evening. As the trees slowly went over the roots buckled the sidewalks several feet in the air and the slow popping of roots could be heard. City crews were trying to cut back the trees before they fell to avoid having the trees catch power lines on their way down.

The heavy rains were good news for local water systems. More than 100 million gallons have flowed into Loch Lomond Reservoir in the past week from Newell Creek, the first time the creek has flowed in five years.

The reservoir, which supplies the city of Santa Cruz, is now about half full. According to Bill Kocher, water department director, once such runoff begins, the reservoir rises about one foot with every inch of rain.

As of today the reservoir is about 10 feet from reaching a level where it could be opened for recreational purposes this summer, Kocher said. The reservoir hasn't been open since 1987.

It's too early to know what effect the rains will have upon water restrictions. Confirmed road closures in the county include:

- Highland Way, three miles from Spanish House, due to a slide.
- Murphys Crossing, closed for the rainy season.
- Lee Road at Struve Slough, due to flooding.
- Skyland at Miller Hill, due to trees and wires.
- Highway 9 south of Felton, due to a major slide.
- Trout Gulch, near Valencia Road, due to a downed tree.

REFERENCE

Wind strewn



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Elizabeth Ballering of Santa Cruz has her hair swept into her eyes as she strolls a debris-strewn Main Beach Friday afternoon.