

Evacuees set to return home

Fire crews gain upper hand; containment expected Tuesday



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Ormsby Brigade volunteer firefighter Noah Selman gives a bit of attention to Burrito while keeping guard for flare-ups at the Ormsby Cutoff Road home of the dog's owner, where only the chimney remains.

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Chief explains initial response at packed community meeting

By JENNIFER SQUIRES
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

CORRALITOS — Residents forced to evacuate their homes when the wind-whipped Summit Fire tore through the Santa Cruz Mountains early Thursday morning may be allowed to return as soon as today.

"It really depends on the weather," said Capt. Matt Streck with Cal Fire Santa Clara County.

The news came as a relief to the 800 residents who were evacuated when the blaze ignited in an empty lot near Summit Road and quickly engulfed the dense, bone-dry chaparral covering the steep slopes.

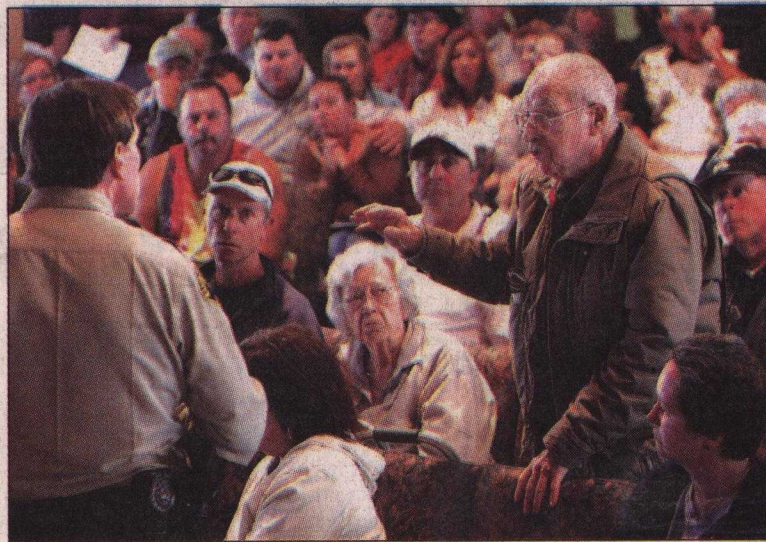
Many of those evacuees, along with Corralitos-area residents whose homes were not threatened, packed into the Corralitos Community Church on Sunday afternoon to hear updates about the firefight and have questions answered.

"I wanted to know when I can go home and are we relatively safe?" said Jeffery Ann Tatum, who evacuated her home off Eureka Canyon Road on Thursday. So long as the weather cooperates, she could be home by Tuesday.

The Summit Fire was 60 percent contained late Sunday, after burning nearly 4,000 acres, 29 houses and 18 outbuildings. Cal Fire officials said they hope to have the fire contained Tuesday, but that firefighters and fire equipment will remain in the fire zone for several weeks to watch for flare-ups.

"We're not going to pull everybody off the fire until we're sure it's out," Streck said. "The mop-up is just going to take a very long time."

Cal Fire plans to have extra staffing at the Corralitos Fire Station, which normally operates one Cal Fire engine with paid firefighters in addition to the vol-



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Browns Valley Road resident Richard Anderson gains the ear of Santa Cruz County Sheriff Steve Robbins as he asks about getting back to his home during the community meeting in Corralitos on Sunday.

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Fire

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unteer fire crews, for up to eight weeks, officials said.

Almost 3,000 fire personnel were working the blaze Sunday.

County Supervisor Ellen Pirie, who spoke at the community meeting, said she was touched when she saw caravans of fire crews driving on Highway 1 toward the blaze.

"This is not something Santa Cruz County could have done by itself," she said, thanking Cal Fire and inspiring a standing ovation from community meeting attendees.

The support for firefighters was evident throughout the area. People nailed hand-made "Thank You" signs to their fences and trees, propped them up against mail boxes and cheered as fire trucks rolled through Corralitos during the weekend.

"I just really appreciate these guys," Pat McMillan, who lives on Browns Valley Road but wasn't evacuated, said of the firefighters. "It's amazing. They just really jumped on it."

And during the meeting Chief John Ferreira of Cal Fire Santa Cruz County explained to residents how fire crews responded when the Summit Fire was first reported around 5 a.m. Thursday. He specifically addressed why fire engines were not sent to Ormsby Cutoff Road, the area decimated by the fire. Some residents had questioned why it took hours for a fire truck to arrive, despite repeated 911 calls and one resident driving nine miles down the mountain to the Corralitos Fire Station to get help.

"The firefighters we had there, we had asked to stay there," Ferreira said. He explained that fire crews had been dispatched to the Summit Road area where the blaze ignited and were trying to track the progress of the fire, but were hampered by darkness and winds that kept the smoke from rising in a column — which would have helped pinpoint the area that was ablaze.

Firefighters at the Corralitos station were told to stay there to respond to other calls, such as medical emergencies that might have occurred.

"I understand the anger and again, the frustration," Ferreira said. "I can only say the engines we had went" to the fire.

The fire-ravaged Ormsby area looked like a "moonscape" after the flames rushed through, the vegetation reduced to blackened sticks and the ground charred.

"It's seldom that you see that,"



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

The burned-out frame of an exercise bench surrounded by nothing but scorched earth and burned trees on Ormsby Cutoff Road takes on the metaphorical role of a memorial cross for the Summit Fire devastation.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

The Summit Fire nears a Summit Road home Sunday. The fire has destroyed 29 houses.

Ferreira said, adding that the fire may have moved too fast and too hot through the area for firefighters to safely defend the dozen houses that were destroyed.

"I'll tell you now, not one of my firefighters is worth your house," Ferreira said at the meeting. "They would not have been sent in there."

The Ormsby response question was the most volatile issue raised at the community meeting. Other questions included how people could find out which fire crew protected their home and thank the firefighters, or if people could start locking their gates again. Representatives from several county agencies took a few moments to talk

about groundwater quality, a possible Planning Department meeting with residents in June, grief counseling for those who lost their homes, returning rescued animals and repairing roads that might have been damaged by the blaze or fire equipment.

Sheriff's Office representatives also spoke and said they plan to continue their presence in the area, and will keep its command post at the fire station until Saturday. Deputies have tried to prevent burglaries in the evacuated area — although there have been at least two reports of looting since the fire broke out — and ensure residents accessing the fire zone are only going to check on their

Evacuations ending

The Sheriff's Office announced when evacuated residents may be able to return home. All times are tentative. Contact the Sheriff's Office at 471-1121 for information.

- Below Avocado Road: Can return now.
- Browns Valley, Hazel Dell and Avocado roads: Today or Tuesday.
- Santa Clara County community of Sveadal: Today or Tuesday.
- Buzzard Lagoon Road: Tuesday.
- Eureka Canyon area, including Rider Road and Tindell Ranch Road: Tuesday or Wednesday.
- Summit Road area: Wednesday at the earliest.

SOURCE: Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office

homes and run errands until the evacuation order is lifted.

However, there have been some problems.

Cyclists coming from Highland Way and Soquel Demonstration Forest rode on Summit and Eureka Canyon roads Sunday, two areas with heavy fire truck traffic and ongoing spot fire, Sgt. Fred Plageman said.

"It's extremely dangerous. It's a potential hazard and people should use some common sense," Plageman said, though he added that he's a cyclist and

understands the appeal of riding lightly used roads. "I realize it's a popular place to ride, now is just not the time to do it."

Also, deputies suspect that some residents are no longer following the evacuation orders.

"I think people have returned to their homes," Plageman said, explaining that deputies will not go back and force people to leave unless the fire grows. "But if conditions change, we'll have to do a re-evacuation."

Contact Jennifer Squires at 429-2449

Fire at a glance

ACRES BURNED: 3,920.

CONTAINED: 60 percent, as of 7 p.m. Sunday.

STRUCTURES DESTROYED: At least 29 homes and 18 outbuildings.

THREATENED: 550 residential; 20 outbuildings.

COST TO FIGHT FIRE: \$8.16 million

INJURIES: Five minor sprains and strains to firefighters.

FIREFIGHTERS: 2,953.

EQUIPMENT: 278 engines, two airtankers, 10 helicopters, 35 bulldozers and 47 water tenders.

FIRE STARTED: In an empty lot in the woods along Summit Road, shortly before Maymen's Flat, at mile marker 7.53. The cause is under investigation.

MANDATORY EVACUATIONS: 400 residences were evacuated at Lower Highland, Buzzard Lagoon, Vaca del Sol, Upper Browns Valley and Avocado, Hazel Dell, Redwood Road/Browns Valley Road and the Santa Clara County community of Sveadal and Mc Phee Road.

VOLUNTEERS: The Volunteer Centers of Santa Cruz County are pre-registering individuals who are interested in providing support in response to the fire. Call 427-5070 or go to www.scvolunteercenter.org.

DONATIONS: The Santa Cruz County Chapter of the Red Cross has provided \$110,000 in services to fire victims. To donate to the Santa Cruz County Disaster Relief Fund, call 462-2881 or visit www.sccredcross.org and click the Donate Now button. The United Way of Santa Cruz County has set up a Summit Fire Recovery Fund. To donate, call 479-5466 or send a check payable to United Way to 1220 41st Ave., Capitola, CA 95010 and include 'Summit Fire Recovery Fund' on the memo line.