

Packing shed fire definitely arson

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The fire that destroyed a packing shed at Farmers Cold Storage was a case of arson, fire officials have confirmed. Meanwhile, a \$15,000 reward has been offered for information about who started fires at food-processing plants and other locations in the last week.

"We have completed the first phase of our investigation," Watsonville Fire Chief Gary Smith said at a City Hall press conference this morning. "Now we are anxiously looking for more information from the community that may lead us to find who started the fire."

Monday's fire at the facility adjacent to Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. caused an estimated \$500,000 damage to the metal shed and the freezing and packing equipment inside.

Police suspect that that fire, and possibly several others in the area during the past week, are related to the 40-day strike by Teamsters employees of Watsonville Canning and Richard A. Shaw Inc.

Following three days of investigation, a joint team from the state fire marshal's office, the Santa Cruz County district attorney's office and the Watsonville Fire Department has determined the Farmers Cold Storage blaze was deliberately set in two locations within the building.

Smith said a highly flammable liquid had been spread over

packing materials in the 9,300-square-foot building, causing the fire to spread quickly.

Fire officials said the next phase of the investigation will examine insurance records that will indicate the value of the equipment lost in the blaze.

Police Chief Ray Belgard, who also attended this morning's press conference, said Watsonville Canning and Shaw have offered a \$15,000 reward for information about Monday's fires, or about the smaller fires set in dumpsters and packing materials last Thursday and Friday night.

Officials say they have no information linking last week's fires with the Farmers Cold Storage blaze. Smith said, also, there is no further information about the minor fire set Monday night at the Beach Street Cafe, although it, too, is being treated as strike-related.

Smith asks anyone with information to call 728-6110.

"We want to interview more

people," he said. "We've interviewed at least 20 to 30 people, including pickets, guards and company officials."

There are no suspects in the case, and Smith said representatives of both the union and the company have been questioned. "We haven't ruled out anyone at this point," Smith said.

In other strike-related developments, the Strike Support Committee — a group of strikers not acting under union auspices — is seeking a moratorium on evictions of striking workers and foreclosures on their homes.

The group is gathering petition signatures in support of the moratorium to present to the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors.

Meanwhile, the city of Watsonville followed up on its pledge to prompt new negotiations between striking workers and plant owners. Mayor Ann Soldo said this morning a letter was sent to the two processing plant owners and the Teamsters union requesting a meeting with her and City Manager John Radin to encourage future negotiations.

Previous talks between the companies and the union have resulted in an impasse the last two weeks, with no future meetings scheduled.

"I feel strongly that the only way labor problems can be settled is by sitting down at a table and discussing the issues," Soldo said.

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