

FELTON

# Unit specializes in large animal rescues

Animals

By KIMBERLY WHITE

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**FELTON** — The overweight cat that found itself stuck in a fence earlier this week may have been large — for its size, anyway — but not large enough to draw out the big guns.

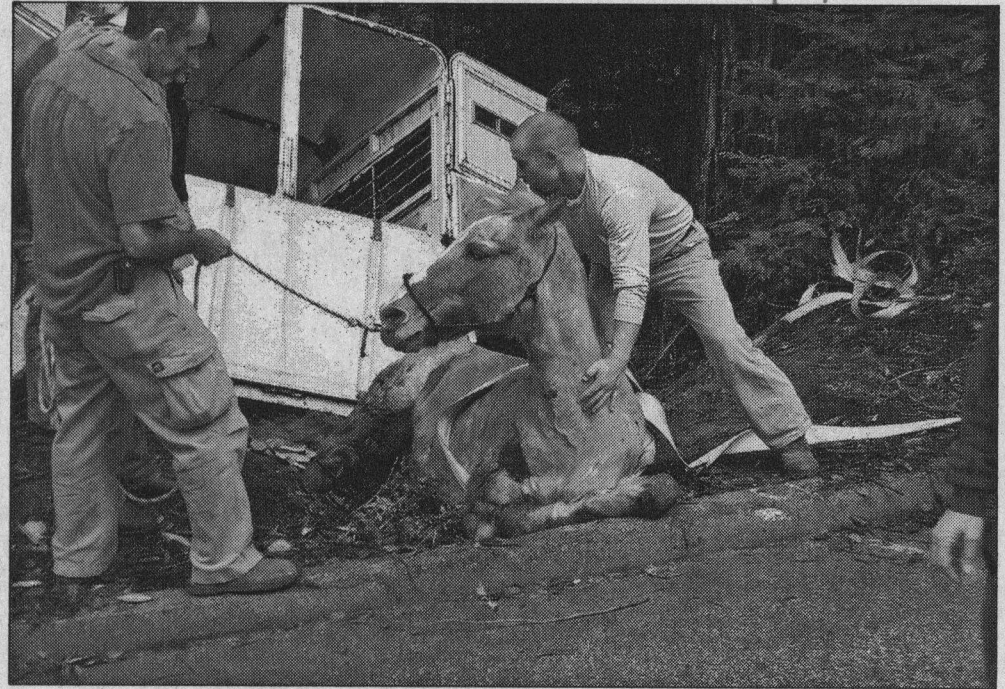
For nearly 20 years, the Felton Fire Protection District has operated the county's Large Animal Rescue unit. It got its start back in 1996, after a horse fell down an embankment at Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park. But at the end of a long and fruitless rescue operation, the difficult decision was made to euthanize the otherwise uninjured animal.

The fire district was not officially involved in the incident, but the horse owners' veterinarian was.

"He said if the horse had been able to be moved about 10 feet horizontally back up the hill, it would've been free of the obstacles and would've been able to stand up," recalled Ron Rickabaugh, the district's chief since 1991.

The incident had an unfortunate ending, but that distress call has indirectly saved countless animals from the same fate. It got firefighters thinking about what they would've done differently if the rider had been the one in danger, ultimately leading to the formation of the Large Animal Rescue unit.

"We're trained in human rescue, so we thought, 'Couldn't we adapt the same rope and rescue techniques



**Felton firefighters work to get a horse back on its feet after a trailer accident on Highway 9.**

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to facilitate moving a horse to a better spot?" Rickabaugh said.

Two then-volunteers, Mike and Deb Fox, soon developed a program to teach the skills needed for large animal rescue operations, and firefighters began taking life-sized horse mannequins into rural areas to practice their skills. The Foxes later formed the Large Animal Rescue Co., which teaches the specialized skills necessary for rescue personnel, animal organizations and individuals to save the lives of animals that can weigh more than 1,000 pounds.

Calls for assistance are relatively rare, Rickabaugh

said, and most originate locally. Firefighters also travel to neighboring counties when needed, assisting with everything from fallen horses and trapped pigs to deer flailing around in residential swimming pools. Most recently, they were called out to help an elderly horse that had fallen in its pasture and was unable to stand. Working side-by-side with their Branciforte counterparts, they tried to right the horse manually, then with a tractor. But the horse was unable to stand on its own, Rickabaugh said, and had to be euthanized.

But is rescuing animals in distress really in a firefight-

er's job description?

"Our job is to protect life, property and the environment, and so in these instances, someone's pet becomes property," Rickabaugh said. "For some people, it's just a pet, something for recreation. For others, it's truly an investment, some kind of a prize horse, or it could be important to their business. So in terms of a fire agency getting involved in helping, we're looking at trying to protect your property as well, so it fits in that category."

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