Dry parks closed

Drought has turned open space into tinder box

By GREG BEEBE
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SANTA CRUZ — Tinder-dry conditions in city parks and open-space land have forced the closure of portions of DeLaveaga Park, Arroyo Seco Canyon, University Terrace Park, the Pogonip property and Harvey West Park.

At DeLaveaga Park, the shooting and archery ranges and horseback trails have been closed until further notice.

"The areas that are remote are the ones that we're concerned about because fires there can gain in size rapidly before anybody knows about it," said Santa Cruz Fire Chief Ed Ekers.

A fast-moving grass fire Saturday afternoon at Glen Canyon and Mill roads blackened 14 acres before it was brought under control. Firefighters said it was the type of blaze that could have been disastrous if it got away.

"It's not our intent to keep parks away from people," Ekers said. But, conditions are so arid in some city parklands that even many trees are beginning to dry out and turn brown, he said.

"The experts are telling us the forests will not be able to come back to expected fuel-moisture counts for four regular winters," Ekers said.

"It shows you how severe the dryness is. If we get a good winter, we might not see as significant a problem next year. But it's going to take some time to recover."

Compounding the danger, the chief said, is the city's reliance on the California Department of Forestry for mutual-aid protection of "urban interface wildland areas," or open space next to the city.

"We're very much dependent on the CDF for firefighting assistance," Ekers said. "CDF resources locally have been called upon to fight fires throughout the state. Without their backup, it creates a concern for the city fire department," Ekers said.

Four straight drought years have taken their toll. "If it was dry at the beginning and middle of the summer, it's twice as dry now," Ekers said. "We'll see fires breaking out all over the place, I would predict."