

Hail, slides, snow, sun, rain and rising rivers

Highway 1 snarled by hailstorm

Staff and wire reports

A seemingly endless storm continued to pound Santa Cruz County and the rest of Central California Thursday, although weather forecasters say today should begin a dry period.

Hail, mudslides and flooded roads were the disorders of the day, as this week's spring storm system spent itself on a fourth day of misery for waterlogged county residents.

One hailstorm around 2:20 p.m. hit the coast, and stopped cars along Highway 1 as it moved inland and south. The ice was coming down so hard and thick, drivers reported, that it was impossible to see the road.

The storm dumped more rain on already saturated hillsides, causing mudslides that inundated one Boulder Creek home and closed more roads. The Pajaro River rose to near flood warning stage by Thursday afternoon.

Now for the good news: Local weather observer Ron MacDonald said the storm that has been pummeling the state since Monday has moved on, and today skies should begin to clear, with warmer, sunnier weather on tap for the weekend.

MacDonald said the low pressure system west of Oregon had moved east by Thursday evening, and the weather front trailing it had dragged across California. "Finally the thing has moved eastward," he said.

Administrators at the San Lorenzo Valley Unified School District closed schools Thursday.

Superintendent Andrew Meyer said he decided to close the schools because of dangerous travel conditions and weather forecasts that predicted another hosing Thursday. The schools were to be open today but students won't have to attend because of a teacher-training day.

Students had been trapped at both Redwood and Boulder Creek elementary schools Wednesday after a tree toppled across Highway 9, closing the main road into Boulder Creek.

The school buses were also trapped in the north end of the San Lorenzo Valley by the closing, he said.

"We decided it would be dangerous for children to be traveling on the road," said Meyer. "We just didn't want to take a chance today on having the situation reoccur."

The latest storm system sent rainfall totals ever upward. Rainfall for the 24 hours ending at 5 p.m. Thursday totaled .82 inches in Santa Cruz, 1.26 inches in Ben Lomond and .77 inches in Watsonville. Since Monday, the storm system had produced 3.14 inches of rain in Santa Cruz; 8.46 inches of rain has fallen in the Santa Cruz area for the month of March, nearly double the normal March total of 3.79 inches.

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Watsonville has received 24.83 inches of rain for the year, about double last year's total. More than 75 inches of rain has fallen on Boulder Creek this year, compared to 28.57 inches last year.

This month's deluge has followed a dry February, where only .47 inches fell in Santa Cruz compared to a normal total of 4.81. But January's incessant storms produced 17.56 inches of rain, nearly three times the normal total of 6.51, Santa Cruz observer MacDonald said.

So far this year, 34.93 inches of rain has fallen in Santa Cruz compared to 18.53 last year. Normal Santa Cruz rainfall for a year is 28.98 inches. April on average brings another 2.5 inches of rain, said MacDonald.

The bitter Alaskan storm system dumped more snow Thursday in the Sierra Nevada, causing deadly pileups on Interstate 80 and setting a record for the wettest March in history.

New blizzards caused two deaths in chain-reaction accidents involving more than 20 vehicles on both sides of Interstate 80 near Auburn.

The freeway, Northern California's major east-west artery, was closed in both directions Thursday afternoon between Auburn and Truckee, the California Highway

Patrol said.

A big rig and more than 10 other vehicles collided in the westbound lanes near Blue Canyon west of Truckee around 1:15 p.m., killing two and injuring five. Fifteen minutes later, two big rigs collided with two cars in the eastbound lanes near Blue Canyon, injuring two.

The new snow should extend spring skiing well into May, said spokesmen at Boreal and Kirkwood ski areas.

There is almost 4 feet of water content in the Sierra snowpack, which is 171 percent of normal.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, snow dusted mountain tops from Mount Hamilton in Santa Clara County to Mount Tamalpais in Marin County. Hail and street flooding snarled morning commutes.

The state's major rivers remained below flood stage and state water managers said reservoir capacity can absorb a heavy snow melt this spring.

"It looks like generally the major river basins and the reservoirs above them will be able to handle this runoff," Cohen said, because of previous releases.

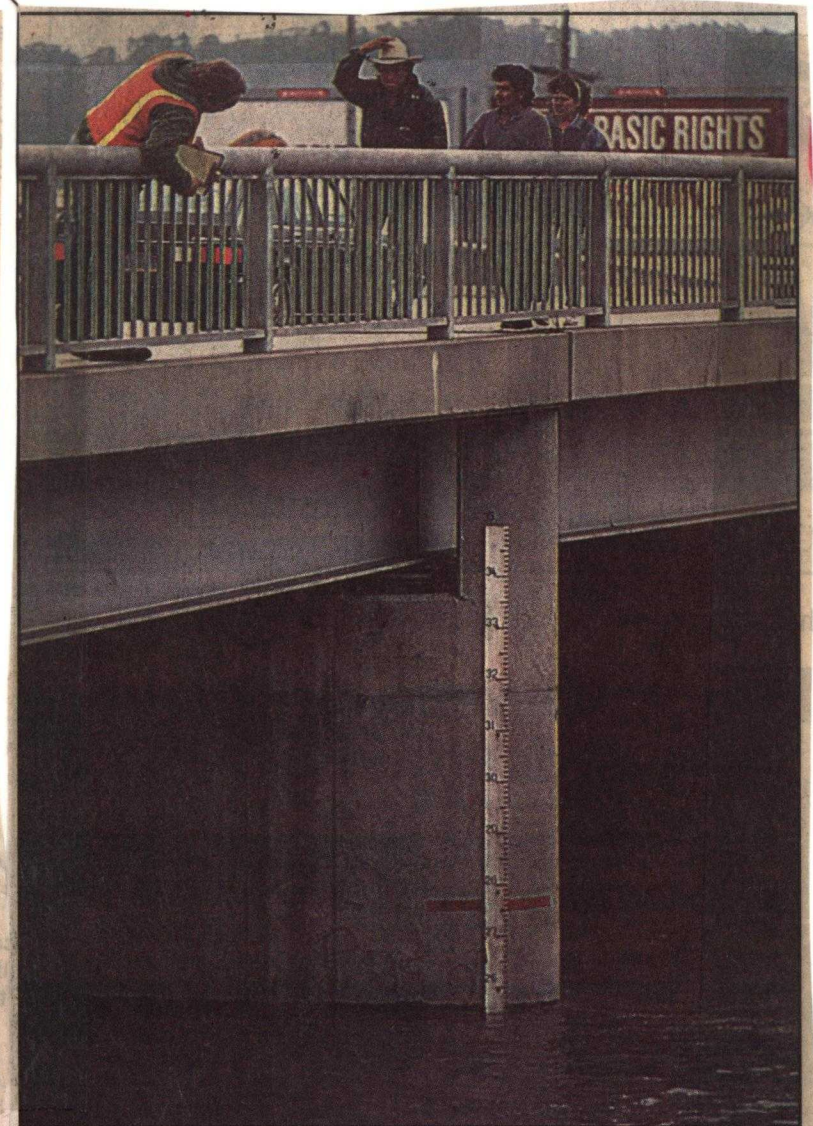
Sentinel staff writers Don Miller, Robin Musitelli and John Bessa, along with The Associated Press, contributed to this report.



Christopher Lyons, 12, and his sister Jenny, 7 of Boulder Creek work to clean up a mudslide that swept through

their Douglass Avenue home on Wednesday night. See **Page A6** for the story.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel



Watsonville city worker Dale Hansen checks the water level as it flows under the Pajaro bridge on Thursday.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel