

Lightning strikes SC County

By JOHN BESSA
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SANTA CRUZ — A bright and noisy storm rumbled through the county Tuesday, spreading lightning flashes, thunder and rain but causing few serious problems.

A smattering of roads were closed on and off throughout the county from fallen trees, rocks and power lines, including Highway 9 in Ben Lomond, Bonita Drive in Aptos and Glenwood Drive north of Scotts Valley.

But the most obvious part of the storm was the lightning.

"It sure has been pounding," said Tom Walker of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection office in Felton. The CDF monitors a U.S. Bureau of Land Management lightning tracking system to trace potential forest fires.

At the storm's heaviest, there were more than 50

lightning strikes in the northern Monterey Bay area from 5:30 p.m. to 8:15 p.m., Walker said. The lightning started about 1:30 p.m., he said.

The lightning strikes probably won't start fires, he said.

"We've had so much wet weather with this that it's probably not going to be much of a problem," he said.

The storm's electrical power and bursts of heavy rain stemmed from extremely low air pressure for this time of year, according to the National Weather Service.

"It's producing lightning, hail and over an inch of rain in several areas," said Bob Benjamin, meteorologist technician for weather service in Redwood City.

Rainfall totals at 6 p.m. ranged from .57 inches in Zayante and .43 inches in Bonny Doon to .01 inches in Aptos and .06 inches in Watsonville. Santa Cruz got .27 inches.

Power failures accompanied the storm. A Pacific Gas and Electric Co. spokesman said there were "doz-

ens" of outages all over the county and the Monterey Bay area.

Most were weather-related, said Ron Rutkowski of PG&E, caused by lightning or trees mixing with power lines and equipment.

Power failures were reported in Lompico, Felton, and Bonny Doon.

The California Highway Patrol reported a handful of minor accidents Tuesday afternoon and evening.

The CHP issued a flooding warning early in the evening for the length of Highway 17. Rainfall was reaching the point where it couldn't drain off the highway fast enough.

Moisture on the highway Tuesday morning led to accidents and slow traffic, the CHP said.

Weather observers expect the storm to let up by this morning, giving way to widely-scattered showers from Monterey County to Northern California. More snow is expected in the Sierra.