

Fire rages near Hwy 1



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Watsonville firefighter/paramedic Almita Schaefer stages an attack on a wall of flames Friday where five initial fires, possibly set by an arsonist, erupted along Highway 1 between the Buena Vista and Mar Monte exits.

Small fires along highway spread into Larkin Valley area, leveling structures on 500 acres

REGISTER-PAJARONIAN STAFF REPORT

Trees crowned with flames 100 feet high as embers rained down on bone-dry pastures.

Panic-stricken residents struggled to gather up their animals and flee from fast-moving flames that were rolling down hillsides and erupting in pockets of dry grass where sparks had landed and ignited.

A string of five small blazes that started along Highway 1 Friday afternoon exploded in tinder-dry brush along the highway, gusting with the winds and flaring into a 500-acre blaze that incinerated homes and displaced 2,000 Larkin Valley-area residents.

The Trabing Fire reportedly

started under suspicious circumstances, originating from a string of five, small fires set along the east side of Highway 1.

"It started along the highway roadside, and we had a strong statewide response," said Aptos/La Selva Fire Division Chief Jim Dias. "In no time, the wind took off, and we had strong fires (along) Trabing Road, Larkin Valley Road, Buena Vista Road and Old Adobe Road. There were a lot of structures threatened, and smoke was a huge problem."

By 9 p.m. Friday, the fire was 50 percent contained, with full containment expected this morning around 8 a.m., according to Cal Fire.

The blaze, which destroyed at least nine structures in the Larkin Valley area, grew into a complex of fires. Initially, fire officials indicated a 1,000-acre radius for the blaze. Then, by 8:30 p.m., the Santa Cruz County Emergency Operations Center clarified that the Trabing Fire was a complex of separate fires, which burned 300 to 500 acres within a larger 1,000-acre fire area.

At 6:30 p.m., dispatchers alerted law enforcement to a suspicious vehicle report from someone who may have witnessed an arsonist setting the five small fires along Highway 1.



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Residents watch a wall of fire and smoke devour their Larkin Valley Road neighborhood.

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FIRE

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A few minutes before 2 p.m. Friday, emergency dispatchers reported five fires started on the east shoulder of Highway 1 between the northbound Buena Vista Drive and Mar Monte Avenue exits. Those pockets of flame rapidly gained force and crowned in the trees lining the highway shoulder, forcing the California Highway Patrol to close Highway 1 in both directions.

Winds whipped these smaller fires into an inferno traveling eastward, away from the highway and into the Larkin Valley area, where numerous hobby farms and horse pastures occupy a network of paved roads and cul de sacs.

"I looked out my kitchen window and saw two separate columns of smoke," said Jim Carter of Corralitos. "Pretty soon, they merged into one huge column."

Flames overtook homes between Highway 1 and Larkin Valley Road almost as quickly as residents could evacuate. Embers rained down into dry fields, spreading into rings of fire reaching beyond Larkin Valley Road, at one point forcing motorists to drive between banks of flame on either side of this winding road. Within two hours, the initial five fires had expanded into 100 or more individual blazes, firefighters reported in dispatch calls. Eventually, these isolated fires merged into a cluster of larger blazes, still within the 1,000-acre fire zone but reduced in total size to 500 acres, officials reported.

Closures of roads ensued rapidly, creating major traffic congestion in and around Watsonville's city limits. The list of roads closed as of Friday night included Highway 1 at Buena Vista Drive; Highway 1 at San Andreas Road; Highway 1 at Mar Monte Avenue; Larkin Valley Road at Field Brook; Larkin Valley Road at Buena Vista Drive; Larkin Valley Road at Mar Monte; White Road at Freedom Boulevard; Bowker Road at Freedom Boulevard; Larkin Valley Road at Buena Vista Drive; and restricted traffic at Freedom Boulevard at Hames Road.

The Santa Cruz County Sher-

iff's Office evacuated all of Trabing Road south to Larkin Valley and Larkin Valley Road from Old Adobe north to Mar Monte; Manfre Road from Buena Vista to Larkin Valley Road (both sides, including Lucerne, Eucalyptus, Locarno, Geneva and Zuich); and Calabasas Road from White Road to Freedom Boulevard, the Santa Cruz County Emergency Operations Center reported.

Early in the firefighting effort, residents of Larkin Valley Road gathered at a roadblock near the Airport Boulevard on-ramp, demanding entry into the fire area to save their animals. By 6 p.m., officials were allowing residents back on Larkin Valley Road to retrieve pets, but fire officials urged the public to stay out of the fire zone today to aid the firefighting effort.

Buena Vista resident Richard Lopez was one of 2,000 residents from the Larkin Valley area to be evacuated.

"The sun was blazing orange, and I thought the fire was blowing my way," he said Friday, describing the towering cloud of smoke that nearly blotted out the sun.

The Red Cross set up an evacuation center at the Aptos High School gym, located at 100 Marine Way. Another evacuation center and overnight shelter was located at Lakeview Middle School at 2350 East Lake Ave.

The Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds became the early, designated drop-off spot for horses and other livestock, according to Chris Hirsch, public information officer for the county.

Horses located north of the fire later were being sent to the Showgrounds at Graham Hill Road and Sims Road. Horses located south of the fire were being sent to the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds. Santa Cruz County Animal Services provided assistance to residents who received mandatory orders to evacuate their homes and needed assistance removing pets. Anyone needing information about pet evacuation was asked to call 454-7303 and select prompt 2.

Twenty engines and about five strike teams battled the blaze, Hirsch said. Two days of temperatures at nearly 100 degrees set the stage for dried-out trees, brush and grass.

"We've got a lot of fuel," Hirsch said.

Gusty winds from 2 p.m. quieted slightly by 6 p.m. and eased the threat of the fire expanding dramatically, she said.

"The good news is we don't have those winds, the bad news is the humidity is very low," Hirsch said in an afternoon update.

Aerial support came as early as 2:30 p.m., when the fires were spreading along Highway 1. At least one tanker was called in. The aircraft dropped retardant with the help of a spotter plane.

The Watsonville Municipal Airport was closed at 2:50 p.m., according to airport manager Don French.

French said that the airport provided fuel for helicopters that were utilized to fight the fire.

The Watsonville Fire Department asked Pacific Gas and Electric to suspend power for 568 customers, amounting to nine separate power outages, said Jeff Smith, a PG&E spokesperson.

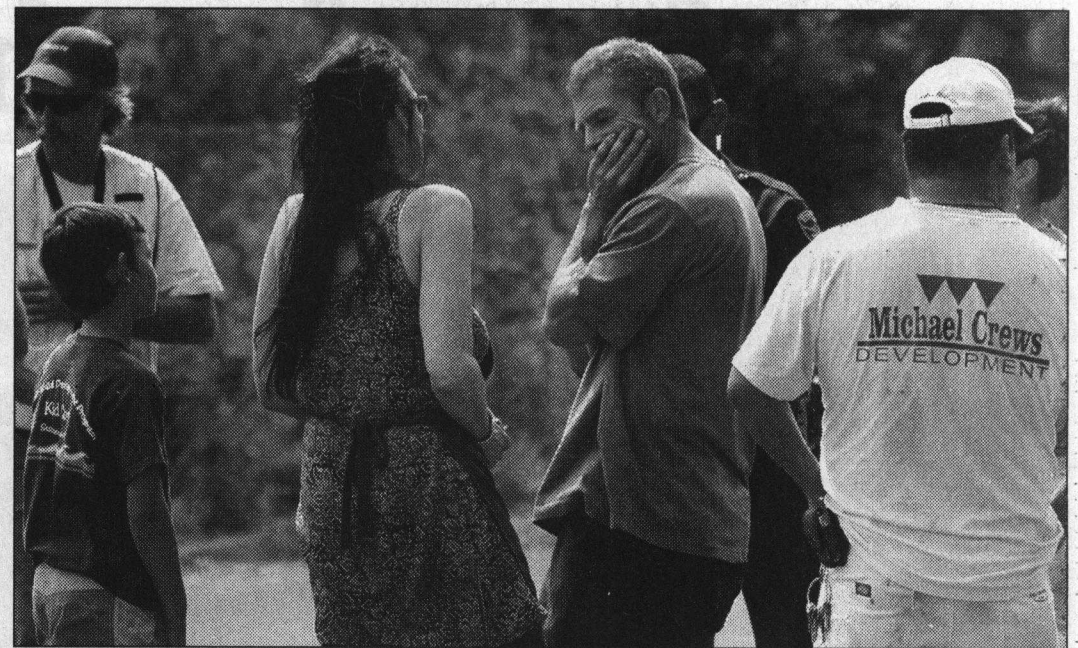
Scenes of chaos

In a horrific scene from Larkin Valley Road, panicked horses galloped around pastures while the fire rolled through nearby fence lines. Trucks with horse trailers jockeyed with cars and SUVs as residents tried to gather their pets and livestock and escape on overcrowded roads. Traffic was strung along Larkin Valley Road and other side roads, creating a traffic jam near the Watsonville Municipal Airport. Finally, police had to set up roadblocks.

Highway 1 southbound, while closed initially, was reopened by 5 p.m. Friday. The northbound lanes of Highway 1 from Airport Boulevard north were expected to remain closed indefinitely, according to the Santa Cruz County Emergency Operations Center.

Freedom Boulevard was swallowed up in gridlock traffic, and the scene of bumper-to-bumper vehicles was duplicated on San Andreas Road.

Remy Jaquez was one of dozens of people stranded Friday afternoon on Larkin Valley Road near the Airport Boulevard on-ramp onto Highway 1. In the third hour of the Trabing Fire, many people were pacing, oth-



Alanna Anderson/Register-Pajaronian

Anxiety was high for residents wanting to reach their homes inside the fire evacuation zone.

ers were growing angry and emotional and demanding to know why they couldn't re-enter evacuated areas, while many sat in their vehicles, staring at the fire and smoke.

"I don't know how bad it is," Jaquez admitted, dealing with the confusion of the moment. "It's nerve-racking knowing the house I grew up in might be in flames soon. There's nothing I can do but sit here and wait. I can't get through at all right now, but I want to."

Jaquez said he had lived at the family home at 296 Manfre Road until about a year ago. His dad and two brothers were hosing down the house in hopes of avoiding losing it.

Before fleeing the area, Jaquez heard eight to 10 explosions from erupting propane tanks, and he watched a two-story house go up in flames.

"It makes me sick to my stomach," Jaquez said about the possibility that the fire was set intentionally.

Several people at the roadblock resorted to hopping a fence and running across the Watsonville Municipal Airport.

Others simply had to wait.

"They won't let us in to save our animals," said Richard Soria, a resident anxious for information at the Larkin Valley Road roadblock. "The fire isn't in our area yet; we have plenty of time to get out our animals. It's ridiculous."

Kimberlee Watkins said she

wanted to retrieve pictures of her son, Sean Shettle, age 27, who has Stage 4 cancer.

"I can't believe they won't let me go get my animals and pictures of my son," she said.

Eventually, officials allowed residents, including Watkins, to re-enter the area and secure their pets and retrieve priceless possessions.

Saving Castro Adobe

The fire threatened the Castro Adobe house, located near Larkin Valley Road, one of a handful of adobe houses of its kind in the state. Volunteers from the Friends of Santa Cruz State Parks spent the past year restoring the structure, which was designated a Historic Site and a California State Landmark.

Friends of Santa Cruz State Parks announced in a 9 p.m. press release that firefighters had saved the historic Castro Adobe at Rancho San Andres Castro State Historic Park.

The fire was held to grass areas near the two-story Monterey-Colonial-style structure.

"We are thrilled with this news and incredibly grateful for the efforts made by CalFire firefighters," said Randy Widera, director of strategic development and partnerships. "It is a tremendous relief to know that the brick-by-brick restoration of the Castro can continue."

A local emergency

The city's emergency operations center was opened Friday on the second floor of the police department building. Watsonville fire crews joined Cal Fire crews and firefighters from other departments in the firefighting effort, city officials reported. The city also received fire coverage from the North Monterey County and Ben Lomand fire departments, according to city staff.

At presstime, the Trabing Fire remained entrenched east of the Manfre area, an area that lies just outside the city limits of Watsonville.

As the fire gained ground, residents wondered how far it would spread.

"I can just look out my door, and I can see a bunch of smoke," Richard Lopez of Buena Vista said early Friday afternoon. "I wonder if it's coming our way, it is very close. It looks like it is."

Santa Cruz County issued a proclamation of the existence of a local emergency.

The Trabing Fire was named for Trabing Road, a cul de sac parallel to the highway extending north from Buena Vista Drive. The Trabing Fire became the region's third major fire in two months. The Summit Fire burned 4,270 acres near Corralitos, followed by the Martin Fire, which scorched 520 acres near Bonny Doon, both in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Scenes from the Trabing Fire



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Horse owners try desperately to round up a herd of panicked horses on Larkin Valley Road Friday as flames charge down a hillside.





Flames consume a home off Larkin Valley Road about 3 p.m. Friday during the Trabing Fire.

Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian



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A Cal Fire tanker dumps a load of retardant over one of the initial Highway 1 fires.



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

A Larkin Valley Road resident loads her dog into a car during Friday's mass evacuation.



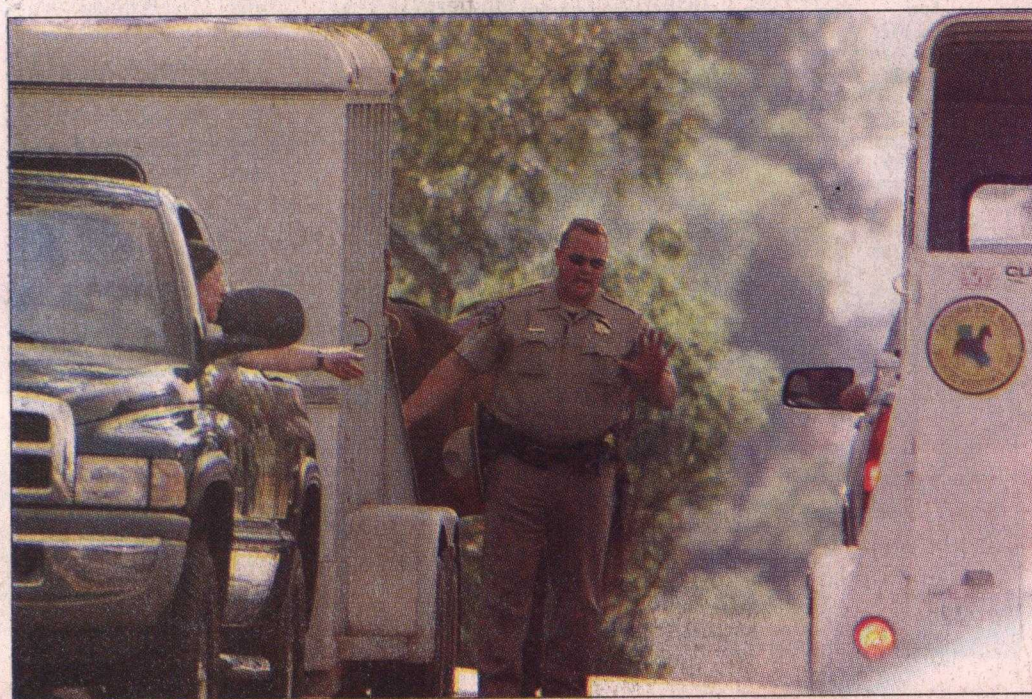
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Remy Jaquez (left) tries to get information about the Trabing Fire from a neighbor who was exiting from the evacuation area.



Alanna Anderson/Register-Pajaronian

Watsonville police officers speak with concerned residents Friday at the edge of an evacuation zone.



LEFT: A California Highway Patrol officer speaks with drivers pulling horse trailers as they try to get in and out of an evacuation zone Friday on Larkin Valley Road near the northbound Highway 1 onramp.

Eric Anderson
Register-Pajaronian

RIGHT: Andrew Salazar submitted this photo of the fire sending a plume of smoke above the Buena Vista area.

Courtesy photo

