

**BREAKING NEWS**

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**EVACUATION INFO**

Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds, 2601 E. Lake Ave., Watsonville, 458-7195

**THE TOLL**

3,200 South County acres burned with at least 10 houses destroyed; no injuries reported

# FIRE RAGES

## High winds fuel largest blaze in decades

Fire + Fire Prevention - 2008

5-23-08



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Jack Pickard, 11, watches the plume of the Summit Fire rise from Mount Madonna Road on Thursday.

**More Inside**

Fire officials say the Summit Fire, the largest in the recent county history, was a long time coming.

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Stories from the fire line.

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Horses, cows, goats, dogs and cats all are left homeless by the blaze.

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As steady winds fuel the Summit Fire, South County towns are being hit hardest by the smoke pouring out of the hills.

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Lack of rain, cleansing fires leads to larger catastrophes.

**EDITORIAL, PAGE A11**

**More online**

■ An interactive, updated

## Firefighters hope weaker winds will slow spread of voracious Summit Fire

By **JENNIFER SQUIRES, GENEVIEVE BOOKWALTER, SHANNA McCORD and J.M. BROWN**

*Sentinel staff writers*

**More Information**

**ROAD CLOSURES:** Summit Road between highways 17 and 152; Eureka Canyon Road north of Hames Road; Browns Valley Road at Corralitos Road; Highland Way at Summit; Poleline at Summit; Mount Madonna Park open to residents only; Morrell at Summit.

**RED CROSS:** Staging at Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds, 2601 E. Lake Ave., Watsonville.

**VOLUNTEER:** Volunteer Centers of Santa Cruz County. For information, 427-5070.

**ANIMAL SERVICES:** Santa Cruz Animal Services helping with large animal evacuations. For information, 454-7303.

CORRALITOS — Fueled by whipping winds and desert-dry brush, a ferocious 3,200-acre wildfire roared through the southern portion of the Santa Cruz Mountains on Thursday, charging through the rugged



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A Cal Fire tanker flies by the Summit Fire as it burns out of control near the summit of the Santa Cruz Mountains on Thursday.

## Residents question fire response

By **JENNIFER SQUIRES**  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

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CORRALITOS Residents of Orms...



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**More online**

- An interactive, updated map of the fire area.
- Submit and view your stories, photos and video.
- Get updated road closure, evacuation information.

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✓ **CORRALITOS** — Fueled by whipping winds and desert-dry brush, a ferocious 3,200-acre wildfire roared through the southern portion of the Santa Cruz Mountains on Thursday, charging through the rugged canyons below Loma Prieta Peak to the outskirts of Corralitos, where hundreds of evacuees fled flames that destroyed at least 10 homes.

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No injuries were reported even among the more than 800 firefighters from at least 30 agencies

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel  
A Cal Fire tanker flies by the Summit Fire as it burns out of control near the summit of the Santa Cruz Mountains on Thursday.

# Residents question fire response

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**CORRALITOS** — Residents of Ormsby Cutoff Road, the area near the top of Eureka Canyon where the Summit Fire destroyed the most homes, spent Thursday questioning how fire crews responded to the fire.

Denise Kraft and her husband Marc

lost their house to the blaze, even though the couple said they called 911 and the Corralitos fire station 10 times between 5:45 a.m. and 8 a.m. and even drove nine miles to the Corralitos station to ask for help.

“I don’t know that it could have been prevented but I think it could have been

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# Response

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helped," Denise Kraft said. "Nobody jumped on it."

Fire officials said the beginning of a major fire is often chaotic and that crews are often focused on where a fire started and stopping its spread.

The Corralitos station was paged at least three times between 5:40 and 7:10 a.m. to respond to a vegetation fire on Eureka Canyon, according to Cal Fire dispatch records. In at least one of the instances, the station responded that it was staffed only with volunteers and needed a driver/operator to drive the engine.

Marc Kraft said he saw the fire a mile away and watched it cover two miles in about an hour while he waited for firefighters.

"It went down from the Summit down Ormsby trail, still no fire department so I called my neighbors (one a retired firefighter), five or six of them, mostly retired, made sure they knew what was going on and told them to evacuate," Marc Kraft said.

Marc Kraft sent his wife and daughter to Corralitos while he doused his house with a garden hose. But when the palm trees exploded, he knew it was time to go.

"When fire jumped the road, I got really scared, I had the dog in the car and said I'm not going to die in here, and I just left," Kraft said.

He said it took almost three hours for a fire engine to arrive on their road.

By then, it was too late.

They learned Thursday evening that their house and most of their neighbors' homes had burned to the ground.

"Everybody on Ormsby trail, every one of us has lost our entire lives," said Denise Kraft, a Dominican Hospital nurse. "There was no evacuation, there was no call. I was the one and my husband was the one calling the neighbors."

## By The Numbers

**ACRES BURNED:** 3,200. Fire officials say it could grow to 10,000 or more.

**CONTAINED:** 15 percent, as of 7 p.m. Thursday.

**STRUCTURES DESTROYED:** At least 15.

**INJURIES:** None reported.

**FIREFIGHTERS:** 500-plus, including crews from as far as Tuolumne County.

**EQUIPMENT:** 65 engines, seven air tankers, three helicopters and 15 bulldozers.

**FIRE STARTED:** Around 6 a.m. just south of Loma Chiquita near Summit Road.

**MANDATORY EVACUATIONS:** Lower Highland, Buzzard Lagoon, Vaca del Sol, Upper Browns Valley and Avocado, Hazel Dell, Redwood Road/Browns Valley Road; 1,400 voluntarily evacuated, 350 mandatory.

**SHELTERED:** A dozen people and more than 200 horses were being put up at the fairgrounds Thursday night.

**SCHOOL CLOSURES:** All Pajaro Valley Unified School District schools and four county Office of Education community schools are closed today because of air quality concerns.

**VOLUNTEERS:** The Volunteer Centers of Santa Cruz County are pre-registering individuals who are interested in providing support in response to the fire. Call 427-5070 or go to [www.scvolunteercenter.org](http://www.scvolunteercenter.org) to help.

Cal Fire Battalion Chief Mike Marcucci said fire crews originally were sent to the source of the fire on Summit Road. The first 911 call Cal Fire dispatchers received was at 5:17 a.m. and the first fire engine got to the blaze, which started near Summit Road on Loma Chiquita Road, about five miles from Ormsby, at 5:40 a.m., he said.

"I know originally we tried to get everyone in to keep the fire small," Marcucci said, explaining that information from 911 calls is passed to incident commanders who decide how to deploy resources. "We only have so many engines."

Cal Fire in Santa Clara County is the command agency, therefore dispatching firefighters.

He did not know who was staffing the Corralitos station, which houses both volunteer and paid Cal Fire firefighters, or whom Denise Kraft spoke to when she walked into the station asking for help. He said it would make a difference if she spoke with a Cal Fire employee versus a volunteer.

Denise Kraft said there were three fire trucks and several firefighters there at the time.

"They said, 'It's out of our jurisdiction,'" Denise Kraft said. "They didn't do anything.

They're just like, 'Ma'am we're aware of the situation.'"

Marcucci did not know when a fire crew arrived on Ormsby Cutoff Road, which is just a few miles from the origin of the fire, but said he would continue to investigate the response time.

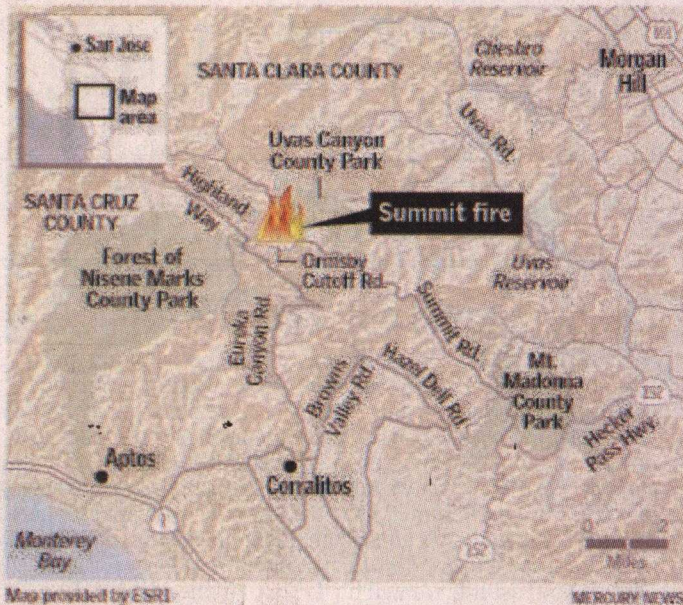
"It's helter-skelter at the beginning of a fire," Marcucci said.

The Krafts had lived in their home for 15 years.

"It's gone. It's gone. It's gone," Denise Kraft said. "It didn't have to go. They just didn't put anybody up there. Not one fire truck, not one helicopter showed up for at least three hours."

Contact Jennifer Squires at 429-2449 or [jsquires@santacruzsentinel.com](mailto:jsquires@santacruzsentinel.com).





## Fire

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statewide who battled the Summit Fire as it roared south from Summit Road through the sparsely populated rural area between Uvas Canyon County Park to Mount Madonna County Park. Columns of smoke poured over the mountains into the Pajaro Valley from sunup to sundown as authorities closed numerous roads, evacuated schools and closed a children's camp.

"We called in enough (fire crews) for the worst-case scenario," said Jared Koos, a Cal Fire engineer and spokesman for firefighters in Corralitos, where authorities said the town was under no immediate threat Thursday night, though flames were within several miles and fire engines were strategically placed in Eureka Canyon.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger declared a state of emergency for Santa Cruz County at 3 p.m., shortly after local officials sent a request to his office for aid in what quickly grew into the worst wildfire in the area in two decades. Cal Fire officials said they believe they know the cause of the fire, though they declined to reveal it while the matter remained under investigation.

Officials confirmed the fire began on the western edge of

Santa Clara County at 5:30 a.m. on Loma Chiquita, a dirt lane north of Summit Road, where at least one area resident reported seeing "people clearing the land and burning brush in big piles" near Maymens Flat Road. "Last week, I hiked over there and it was still smoldering," said the resident, Holly Waddles.

Authorities recommended the evacuation of at least 1,400 homes, and ordered 350 evacuations, causing hundreds of frightened residents to gather at the landmark Corralitos Market & Sausage Co. with as many belongings as they could stuff in their vehicles; others stood determined on their porches and neighborhood lookouts pledging to stay put until flames crawled over their ridgelines. The Red Cross established shelters on opposite ends of the fire line at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds in Watsonville and the Loma Prieta school district headquarters in Los Gatos.

Unrelated fires on Zayante Road near Quail Hollow, about 15 acres, and on Old San Jose Road were contained earlier in the day.

Officials at the fire command post set up at Christmas Hill Park in Gilroy — where firefighters set up a kitchen, sleep stations and power units — said at least 10 homes had been destroyed. An exact count and locations were unavailable, though residents reported that homes in Eureka Canyon



The Summit Fire burns out of control Thursday morning.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

along Ormsby Cutoff Trail were destroyed after they say fire response was delayed.

Residents and animal services authorities brought 200 horses to the fairgrounds, where at least a dozen residents sought shelter; many others, unable to reach their remote properties, headed for motels or the homes of friends and relatives. Many residents lost power and cable TV, leaving some to start battery-powered radios to monitor the fire's spread.

Cal Fire officials said the flames could grow to 4,000 acres overnight and take several days to fully contain. Though the blaze was 15 percent contained by 9 p.m., Cal Fire Battalion Chief Ken McGeever said, "This fire still has great potential."

But, he said, "Any containment on a day like today is good news for us."

Firefighters got a toe-hold on the big blaze in the late afternoon after winds gusting up to 45 mph began to die, but rolling hills of dry, dense vegetation — lacking measurable rain fall since April — continued to feed the fast-moving flames. Crews attacked the blazes with engines and water trucks on the ground as air tankers and helicopters pelted hot spots with fire-retar-

dant foam and water.

Crews staked out homes on Summit Road, trying to protect the structures from the flames that lashed through manzanita and pine trees. On one ridge, a brick fireplace and a wrought-iron fence were the only parts of a house left standing after the fire ripped through the area. The ground was charred, and the fire burned so hot it melted metal baseball bats.

Capt. Bill Morrison with Saratoga Fire, who was on a strike team stationed on Summit Road and acted as a lookout for the team working to protect structures, said, "The wind and the terrain are the big things."

Asked how long it would take to control the blaze, Morrison said it depends on wind speed, and without late rains, conditions remain ripe for a fire to spread.

"It's early for a fire of this magnitude. This is stuff you usually see in September," Morrison said. "The fuel is spread out where normally it would be wet."

The weather could hand firefighters a break today with winds slowing to 10 to 20 mph, according to forecaster Diana Henderson of the National Weather Service. Daytime temperatures are expected to be in

the 60s through the weekend, with overnight lows in the 50s.

After receiving recorded telephone messages from the Sheriff's Office asking people to voluntarily evacuate, residents of the Rancho Corralitos mobile home community for senior citizens on Hames Road scurried around the park asking neighbors if they intended to leave. When some lost the TV cable signal that provided news about the fire's location, many clustered at their Tea House outlook wondering what to do.

"I just hate to pack up anything and leave it," said Marjorie Marker, who along with husband Berj had been receiving calls from their daughter in Santa Cruz begging them to come out of the foothills east of the fire.

Bradley Elementary fifth-grader Jack Pickard, 11, of Corralitos, spent Thursday with his dad, Thorpe, watching the fire burn from Mount Madonna Road. After being evacuated from class earlier in the day, Jack said, "It's pretty cool seeing it," although "it must be ugly over there with all the smoke."

Al Smith, who lives on Avocado Road off Browns Valley Road, near where the fire was burning

about 2 p.m., said he and his wife started packing their vehicle at 8 a.m., just in case they needed to evacuate to Capitola, where they have family. Smith, who has lived on his property 20 years, acknowledged that the threat of wildfires comes with mountain living.

"When you live in the woods and see all the fuel around you, you're concerned," Smith said. "Beauty and serenity seem to be the primary concern up here when there wasn't an emergency."

It's unclear when evacuees will be able to return home, and county officials said they have no plan to let residents know if their homes survived the fire.

"People will just have to go back once it is safe," county spokeswoman Dinah Phillips said. "That's probably the way they will find out."

Cal Fire officials said the Sheriff's Office would be responsible for notifying residents if their houses were lost in the blaze because deputies handled the evacuation process.

"There's really no way they could do it," Phillips said, because it's difficult to confirm who was living at a residence, and officials do not want to put out bad information.

"In a fire you can lose the addresses. It can be hard to tell which house it is," Phillips said. "You wouldn't want to post incorrect information."

Roadblocks are up on closed roads and several evacuated areas are being guarded by law enforcement officers. "Most people are being pretty cooperative," said Sheriff's Chief Deputy Don Bradley.

Six teams of sheriff's deputies paired with search and rescue officers patrolled the evacuated area Thursday night and the Sheriff's Office has gone to 12-hour shifts during the emergency, according to Bradley.

"We're maintaining a pretty heavy presence up there," Bradley said. "When people leave their houses we're responsible for making sure they have something to come back to. People will come in and do stuff."

Sentinel staff members Jondi Gumz, Kurtis Alexander, Sarah Quelland, Shmuel Thaler, Isaiah Guzman, Julie Copeland and Conan Knoll contributed to this report.