

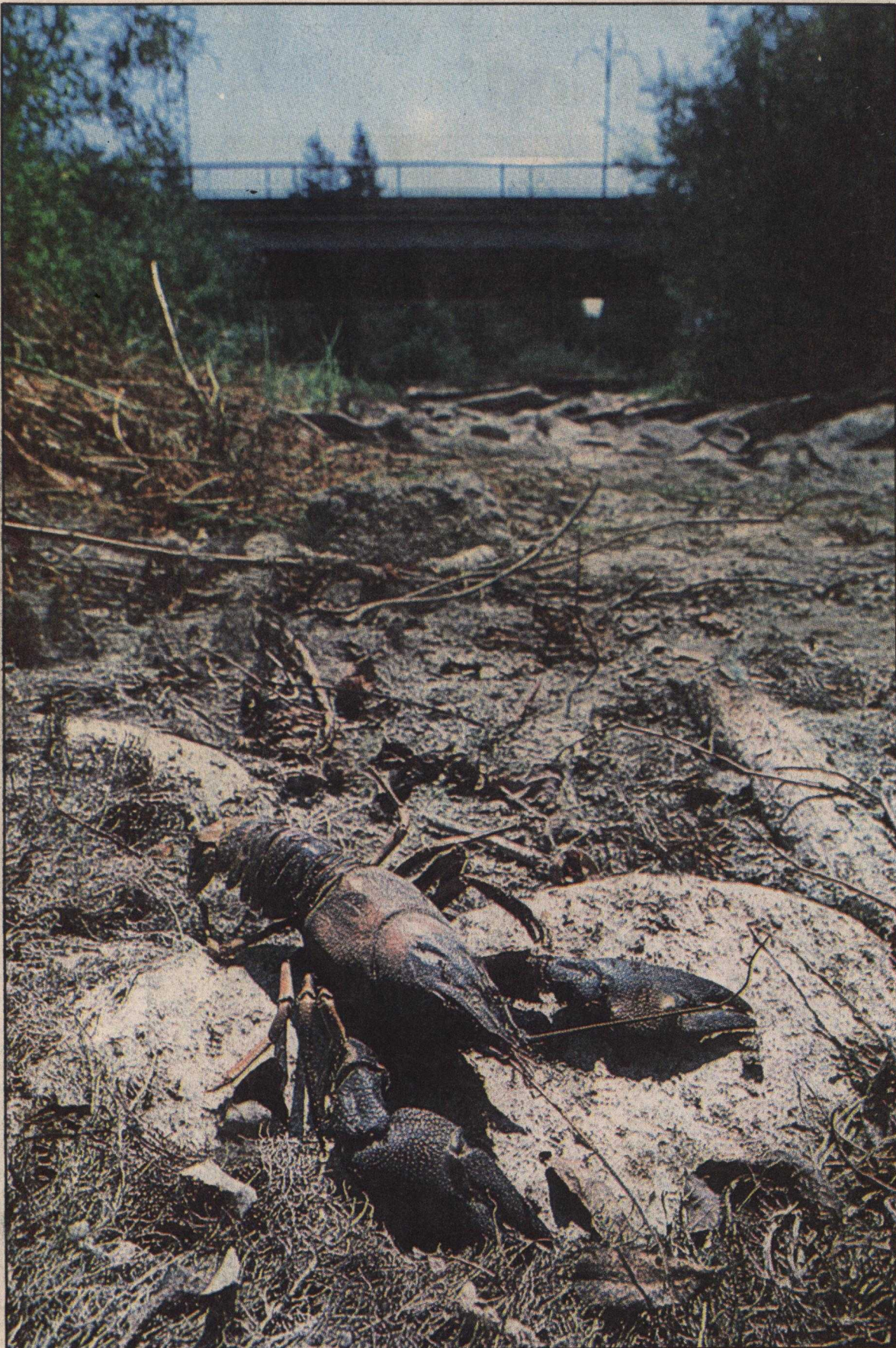
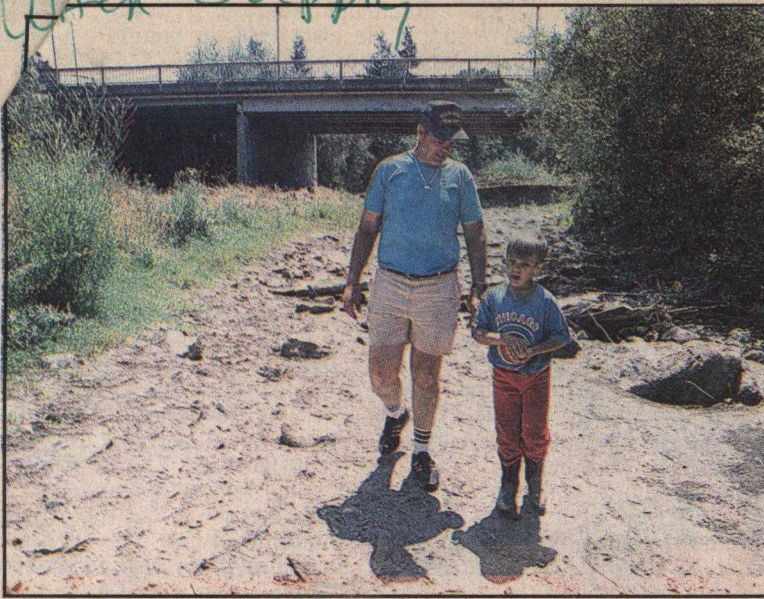
Water Supply

Wildlife ⁸⁻¹³⁻⁹² dries up in Soquel Creek

Officials are uncertain why the water level has dropped

At right, Ter Jelcick and on Austin walk the Soquel creek bed in search of fin, black eels or crawdads they can save. Below, a large crawdad carcass dries on the rocks.

Dan Coyro/
Sentinel photos



By JOHN BESSA
Sentinel staff writer

SOQUEL — Rocks and sand have replaced water in the bed of Soquel Creek, part of a re-emerging trend that is proving to be deadly for fish and other creatures that call the creek home.

Hundreds of dead fish have been sighted since a three-quarter mile stretch of the creek dried up Thursday, said Matt McCaslin of the Monterey Bay Salmon and Trout Project, and that means the kill could potentially be in the thousands.

This is the fourth time in as many years that the creek running from the Santa Cruz Mountains to Capitola Beach has stopped flowing, McCaslin said.

Fish and Game officials have yet to determine why the water level has dropped so, but in the past nurseries and other businesses along the stream have been accused of pumping the creek dry, said Dennis Baldwin of state Fish and Game.

But investigations during the four years the creek has dried up haven't supported that theory, he said.

"We have checked that out and it has not been the primary cause," he said. "We have not been able to determine the primary cause."

Property owners adjacent to the creek are entitled to pump water from the creek, within a certain limit, Baldwin said, although how much they take isn't monitored.

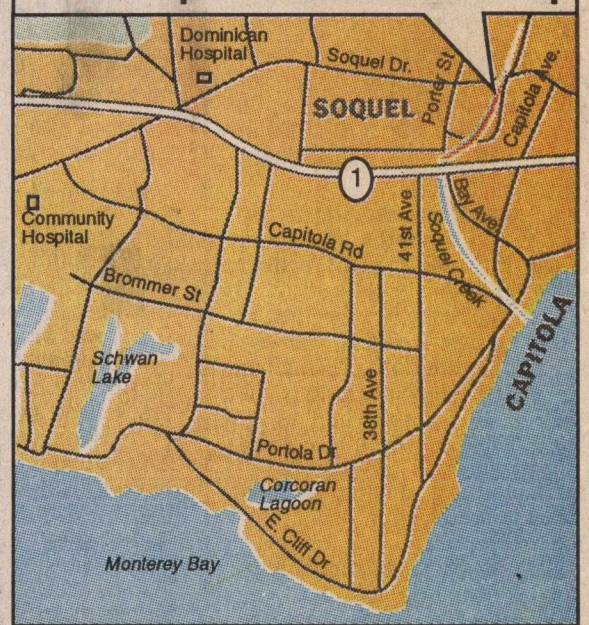
The empty stretch of Soquel Creek on Wednesday began about a quarter-mile north of the Soquel Drive bridge and reached about the same distance south of the Highway 1 bridge, where the lagoon at Capitola Beach begins.

Residents in the area said the water level fluctuated last week, with a little water showing up on Saturday and Sunday, but disappearing at the beginning of the week.

"I think something should be done about it being

Please see SOQUEL CREEK — A4

Area of Soquel Creek that has dried up



Sentinel map

Soquel Creek

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pumped dry," said Frank Bobu, whose home backs up to the creek. Bobu said he saw fish up to 3 feet long swimming in the creek last spring. "I don't think anyone should be entitled to pump this thing dry."

In 1988, Olive Springs Quarry paid a \$2,500 civil settlement for pumping water out of the creek, the first year since the drought began that the creek went dry.

That same year, charges were filed against a nursery for illegally damming the creek, but Fish and Game officials found it was not over-pumping water.

As the flow of water drops, the fish above the dry stretch of the creek instinctively swim downstream, McCaslin said. When they get to the "bottle neck" where the water disappears, he said, they have "had it."

The fish are valuable because they are "wild," McCaslin said. They are genetically better stock when compared to fish raised in hatcheries, he said, and are becoming increasingly rare.

In the past, people held responsible for killing wild fish have had to pay restitution for re-stocking a stream, McCaslin said, about 50 cents each for plantable-sized fish. However, "you can't put a price tag on wild fish," he said.

The Salmon and Trout Project has planted 17,000-20,000 steelhead a year in local streams.

McCaslin said he thinks over-pumping has a lot to do with the water's disappearance. People pumping water out upstream from the dry area see there is water in the creek and don't think of the impact when it is multiplied by other users, he said.

"I think most of the lay folks out there need to

get the message that people aren't the only ones out there that need the water," McCaslin said.

Wells tapped by the Soquel Creek Water District, which draw water from aquifers in the region, are too deep to have an effect on the creek, Baldwin said.

Trees also may be contributing to the disappearance of the creek, Baldwin said. Large trees use a lot of water during the hotter times of the day.

"We have a substantial amount of growth that normally wouldn't be there," he said.

The recent mild winters have allowed smaller trees to get big instead of being ripped out by fast-moving storm runoff, Baldwin said, so the trees along the creek are using more water.

Fish, including baby steelhead and salmon, are dying from the lack of water, said Ernie Kinzli, owner of a nearby fishing-gear shop.

Kinzli said the creek has dried up a little later this year than in the past three or four years. Normal rainfall keeps water in the creek year-round, he said.

But even in the drought of 1976, water remained in the creek year-round, McCaslin said. The reason it is drying up now is a matter of much speculation, he said. "There are a lot of suspicions flying around right now, but so far there is no concrete evidence."

On top of the lack of water in the creek, which salmon and steelhead use for spawning, predators in Monterey Bay are reducing the fish population, Kinzli said.

"With the drought years, it makes it real difficult for fish to survive," he said.

Other fish in the creek are bullheads, stickleback and suckers, Kinzli said.

Baldwin said Fish and Game officials will be at the creek today and Friday to determine why the creek's water has disappeared.