

# Arson not suspected in cold storage blaze

Damage estimated at \$10 million as investigators converge on building to root out fire's cause

By DONNA JONES

djones@santacruzsentinel.com

WATSONVILLE — Investigators said Monday they don't suspect arson caused the fire that did an estimated \$10 million in damage at the Apple Growers Ice & Cold Storage warehouse last week, but they haven't ruled it out.

The four-alarm blaze at the 83-year-old warehouse broke out about 3:30 p.m. Wednesday and burned until Saturday. On Monday, fire investigators, building inspectors and engineers replaced the scores of firefighters who responded from as far away as Alameda County to

tackle the blaze.

"My gut tells me that it wasn't intentionally set based on the time of day and that people were working here," said Michael Ginn of Fire Cause Analysis. "But we haven't completely ruled (arson) out."

Ginn, whose company was hired by insurer Chubb Insurance to pinpoint the cause, estimated damage to the building and contents — mainly Martinelli's apples, sparkling cider and apple juice — would run \$10 million.

Ginn said there were eight to 10 potential ignition sources. He

SEE FIRE ON A2



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Fire investigators converge at the Apple Growers Ice & Cold Storage Co. warehouse Monday.

SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

## FIRE

Continued from A1

said investigators were looking at roofing work done on an attached shed earlier in the day, and at the electrical system and an evaporator that was part of the cooling system. Ginn also interviewed a representative from a pest control company on Monday.

He said arson was "at the bottom of the list" of possible causes.

**'Hopefully, the business will be able to come back and thrive.'**

**ROBERT RYAN,**  
city fire marshal

City Fire Marshal Robert Ryan said a fire inspection had been conducted at Apple Growers earlier this year and that no problems had been found. He couldn't provide a date because he was away from his office.

The city does not have any records of building code violations at the site, said Marcela Tavantzis, assistant city manager.

As investigators probed the site Monday, at one point using a crane to hoist inspectors in a basket to peer into the unsafe interior, a structural engineer worked on plans to shore up the building so cleanup can begin.

Ryan said the building's shell, constructed of poured-in-place concrete, is stable, even without the roof that fell in during the fire. But vibration from the heavy equipment needed to mop up the mess could destabilize the walls, causing a collapse.

"Hopefully, the business will be able to come back and thrive," Ryan said.

Stephanie Phillips, Apple Growers manager, said it could be several days before contractors install the bracing, and it would be well beyond that before an decisions are made about the building's future. Security fencing was installed Monday, and a 24-hour guard has been posted, Ryan said.

Also on Monday, city Public Works and Utility Director David Koch released results from tests of water samples taken from nearby Watsonville Slough during the fire. State Fish and Game had reported fish gasping for air in the slough Friday, and by Sunday hundreds were dead.

Readings for water temperature,

ammonia, E. coli and conductivity — a measure of dissolved solids — spiked during the fire, but Koch said the most significant result was for oxygen content, which Friday dropped to its lowest level in nearly two years of monthly testing and by two-thirds between Thursday and Friday, from 6 mg per liter to 1.58.

Koch said the rise in ammonia could

have resulted from leaks at the burning warehouse, where the chemical is used in the cooling process, or from natural sources washed into the slough by the massive volume of water that was poured onto the blaze — 6 million gallons in the first 24 hours alone. But he said the number, 4.88 mg per liter up from .02 the previous month, was well below toxic levels.



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Fire investigators are lowered by crane over the Apple Growers Ice & Cold Storage Co. warehouse rubble to survey the damage Monday.