



SCORCHED

'STILL AN AWFUL LOT OF WORK TO DO

DAVID M. BARREDA — MERCURY NEWS

Barry Wothers on Friday checks out his Summit Road property in the Santa Cruz Mountains, where his house stood before the Summit fire claimed it Thursday. The Wotherses fled the fire.

Fire + Fire Protection - 2000

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SMOKY AIR: HAZE MAY LINGER OVER VALLEY THROUGH THE WEEKEND

By Amber Dance
 Mercury News

The smoky haze that blanketed the Bay Area on Friday, scenting the South Bay with a campfire aroma and trapping antsy schoolchildren indoors, is likely to continue throughout the holiday weekend.

Winds from the southwest are carrying fine, lung-irritating bits of soot far from their origin in the Santa Cruz Mountains. The bad air could jeopardize the traditional Memorial Day barbecues and picnics.

In some regions, the soot content soared to five times normal levels for this time of year.

In Cupertino, the haze made for visibility of only a mile or two.

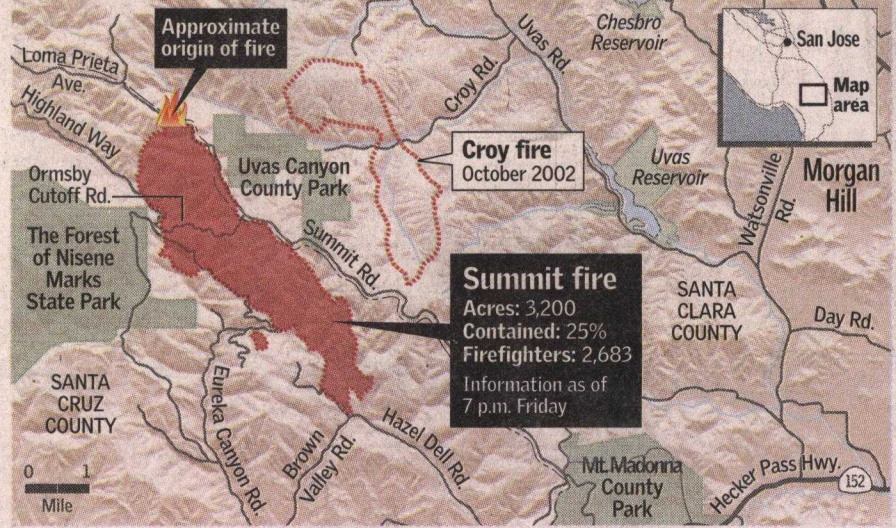
"You can't even really see the hills, which we're right up against," said Cupertino city spokesman Rick Kitson.

At Los Gatos Coffee Roasting Co., the normally crowded sidewalk seating was empty as customers took their joe to go rather than sit outdoors.

At least 18,000 students stayed at home Friday when Pajaro Valley Unified and Loma Prieta Joint

See HAZE, Page 1A

WHERE IT BEGAN



Source: California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection MERCURY NEWS

POINT OF ORIGIN: OFFICIALS TRACK FIRE TO SUMMIT ROAD LOT

By Denis C. Theriault, John Woolfolk and Lisa M. Krieger
 Mercury News

Fire investigators, after combing the Santa Cruz Mountains, believe they have pinpointed the spot where the treacherous Summit fire was sparked: an empty lot in the woods along Summit Road, shortly before Maymen's Flat, at mile marker 7.53.

Planting red, blue and yellow markers, two Cal Fire investigators Friday tracked the direction of the conflagration to a clearing, closed off by a rusted chain slung between two trees. It appeared as though someone had been clearing brush there.

No other information is available about the site, which is being treated as a crime scene.

"This is the only area where we are looking," said Cal Fire spokesman Jim Pope.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Prevention, however, still has not identified the cause of the blaze, but officials have ruled out lightning and downed power lines. Held in check most of its second day by a southwest wind expected to continue today, the fire has chewed through more than 3,200 acres and destroyed at

See FIRE, Page 12A

CALMER WINDS, COOLER WEATHER

Firefighters today could get a bit of cooperation from the weather, with winds gradually calming and temperatures cooling. They may even get a bit

of rain. Forecasters predict a 10 to 20 percent chance of showers. Winds Friday dropped to 20 mph. It should be less gusty today, with winds at 5 to 10 mph.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Information for agencies offering assistance. Page 14A.

THE SUMMIT FIRE

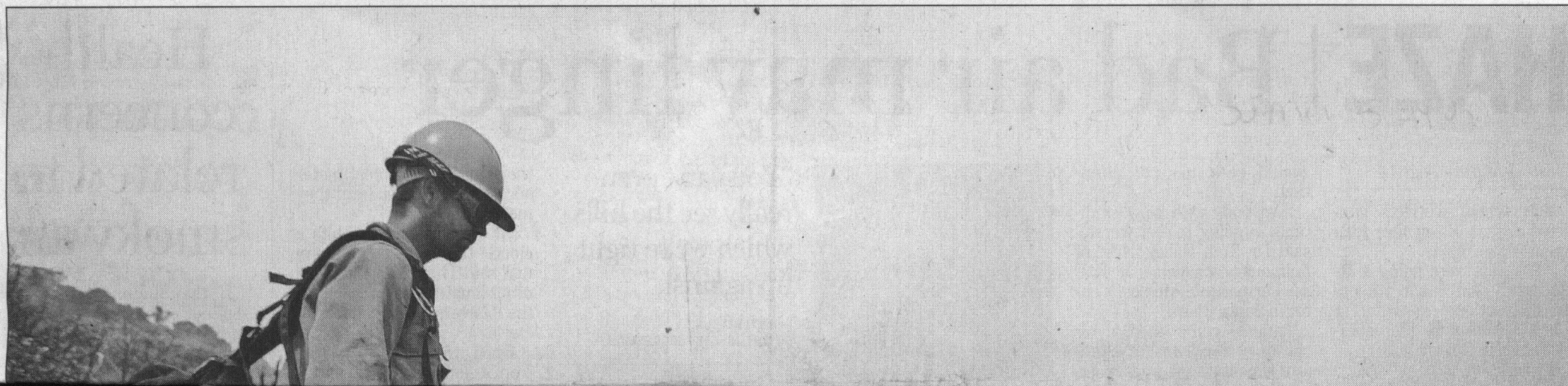


MARIA J. ÁVILA — MERCURY NEWS

A Napa fire chief directs members of his crew who were battling the Summit fire in the Santa Cruz Mountains on Friday, the second day of the blaze.

A fight against fire

2,683 firefighters worked for a second day against the blaze in the Santa Cruz Mountains





MARIA J. ÁVILA — MERCURY NEWS

Forest Service Hotshot crew firefighters Nelson Bruce, left, and Francisco Castellanos work the fire line to create a barrier for the Summit fire Friday. About 3,200 acres have been burned.



KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS

Mayra Pruet, 8, left, and her sister, Noelle, 11, play chess on a computer at a shelter Friday at the Watsonville fairgrounds.



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS

Firefighters from Ross wake in the morning Friday as fresh fire crews camping at Christmas Hill Park in Gilroy prepare to relieve others. Cal Fire reported 2,683 firefighters were brought in.

THE SUMMIT FIRE



MARIA J. AVILA — MERCURY NEWS

Debrae Lopes, a Serenity Way resident who's lived in the Summit Road area for 13 years, watches the fire from a neighbor's home with members of the fire crews from Fresno and King County.

HAZE | Bad air may linger

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Union school districts canceled classes. Elsewhere, kids spent recess inside.

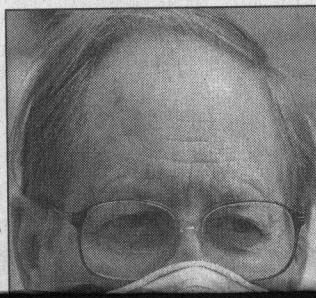
"The kids were going a little nuts," said Susan Kitson, an instructional assistant at Christa McAuliffe Elementary School in Cupertino.

In addition to being stinky,

should seek medical attention.

"Anybody with lung conditions is going to feel worse," said Dr. Tom Dailey, chief of pulmonary medicine at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Santa Clara.

Patients complained of respiratory problems at Stanford Hospital's emergency de-



"You can't even really see the hills, which we're right up against."

— RICK KITSON,
CUPERTINO CITY SPOKESMAN

thousandth of a centimeter across, will persist until they meet water.

"If a smoke particle hits a cloud, the cloud eats them up," said Thomas Cahill, head of a climate aerosol group at the University of California-Davis.

Once mixed with water, from a cloud or rain, the parti-

Health concerns related to smoky air

If the Summit fire keeps sending smoke to the valley, people might be forced to celebrate Memorial Day weekend with board games and

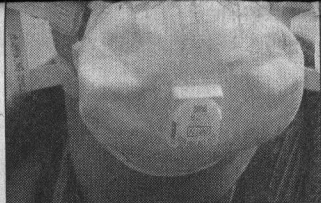
the tiny smoke particles can become trapped in the lungs and enter the bloodstream. They exacerbate asthma, bronchitis and other respiratory illnesses, and also cause problems in otherwise healthy people. Seniors are particularly sensitive, as are children, whose lungs are still developing.

Smoke inhalation can cause symptoms including a scratchy throat, coughing and irritation of the lungs, eyes or sinuses. Those who develop repeated coughing, chest pain, wheezing or nausea

partment. They reported that their symptoms started when they traveled through smoke-filled areas, said Dr. Stephanie Gardner.

Thursday night, meteorologists thought the prevailing winds would send the soot south. But an unexpected northward wind sent the smoke toward Silicon Valley.

The change caught the Bay Area Air Quality Management District off-guard. The district office, which monitors air pollution, happened to be closed Friday, so school principals and others looking for



Harold Short of Corralitos waits Friday for word that he can go back to his home. Many residents of the town were evacuated because of the threat from the Summit fire.

KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS

information and advice Friday morning got few answers.

In Redwood City, the air held choking levels of more than 100 micrograms of particles per cubic meter Friday morning. The usual level there in May is in the teens and 20s.

Smoke pollution is often worse in the mornings because the smoke settles near the ground at night. During the afternoon, stronger winds pick up the soot and mix it with clean air, diluting the pollution.

The soot particles, one-

cies are heavier and drop to the ground.

There is a slight chance of rain today, which could alleviate some pollution. But with winds continuing out of the southwest, the smoky air may continue until the fire is extinguished.

Mercury News Staff Writers Sue McAllister and Sharon Noguchi contributed to this report.

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State bolsters firefighting efforts

BONE-DRY CONDITIONS EXPECTED THIS YEAR THROUGHOUT CALIFORNIA

By Mike Zapler

Mercury News Sacramento Bureau

SACRAMENTO — If a bone-dry spring is any sign, California may be in for a bruising fire season this year. So the state is hiring an extra 1,100 seasonal firefighters, commandeering a super-size tanker that can release 12,000 gallons of fire retardant in a single drop, and imploring homeowners to do their part.

Those efforts notwithstanding, is the state ready for what may be coming? Unlike the past few years, when Southern California has been exceptionally dry and the northern part of the state less so, now both ends are ripe for a major blaze, said Chief Ruben Grijalva, director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire.

"The conditions for large-scale wildfires like we had last year" in Southern California "are significant and statewide," he said. "I can't predict what's going to happen, but I think we're as prepared as we can be."

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger earlier this month signed an executive order to boost the state's firefighting preparations. It calls on Cal Fire to staff additional fire crews and coordinate better with the California National Guard and other state agen-

cies to quickly deploy equipment when a wildfire breaks out.

To pay for the beefed-up firefighting, the governor has proposed a surcharge on homeowner insurance policies — 1.4 percent for homes in disaster-prone zones, 0.75 percent for homes elsewhere — that he says would generate more than \$100 million annually. To take effect, it would have to clear both houses of the Legislature by a two-thirds vote as part of a larger budget plan.

"We need those extra engines; we need more manpower; we need more aircraft; we need to update our aircraft that are outdated," Schwarzenegger told reporters Friday in Gilroy.

Grijalva said the state is in the process of adding 1,100 more seasonal firefighters — about a 25 percent boost from its normal staffing level — meaning that each of its 336 engines will have four firefighters each, rather than three.

"That allows us to attack fires at their early stages more aggressively," he said.

Cal Fire has also contracted with a private company to use a massive DC-10 air tanker that can drop 10 times the amount of fire retardants as the ones it uses now.

But perhaps even more im-

GETTING HELP, LENDING A HAND

The American Red Cross, the Salvation Army and other service agencies are offering shelter and assistance for people displaced by the Summit fire in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Among the services available to evacuees:

■ Food, shelter and counseling are offered in the Crosetti Building at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds, 2601 E. Lake Ave. in Watsonville. Area residents may remain at the shelter until they can return to their homes or until other housing options become available.

■ Food, water and information about the fire will be available from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. today at the Los Gatos Community Center, 208 E. Main St. in Los Gatos.

■ The Santa Cruz County Animal Services Authority is

helping deliver large animals such as horses, cows and goats to the fairgrounds. For assistance moving livestock, call (831) 454-7303. Household pets can receive shelter at the Santa Cruz Pet Resort, (831) 475-1888.

■ For up-to-date notification on shelter locations, or to request assistance from the American Red Cross, local chapters can be reached by phone at: (408) 577-1000 or (831) 462-2881. To learn whether your home is in an evacuation area, call Cal Fire at (831) 335-6717 or (831) 335-6718.

■ To volunteer or to donate money to disaster victims, contact your local American Red Cross chapter through one of the following Web sites: www.redcrossbayarea.org, www.santaclaravalley.redcross.org, www.sccredcross.org.

portant than Cal Fire's preparation, officials say, is making sure homeowners are prepared. Grijalva said the state is stepping up what critics have called its lax enforcement of a law requiring homeowners in fire-prone areas to clear brush within 100 feet of their home — otherwise known as "defensible space."

Cal Fire issued only 60 citations total in 2005 and 2006; Grijalva said he ex-

pects that figure to rise considerably this year. Citations can be as much as \$500 depending on the number of violations.

Cal Fire's Web site includes maps of every county showing areas considered to be fire-prone and subject to the 100-foot law, <http://frap.cdf.ca.gov/data/frapgis-maps/download.asp>.

But if homeowners are unsure, officials said, the safest bet is to visit the nearest fire

station and ask what to do. The Santa Clara County Fire Department and Cal Fire have programs that offer site visits advising people how to protect their homes. Another resource is the Santa Clara County FireSafe Council, www.sccfiresafe.org/Fire-Safe/LivingWithFire.htm.

Still, no amount of prevention is foolproof, and insurance officials caution homeowners to prepare for a catastrophe.

As he announced a "Wild-fire Awareness Week" earlier this month, Insurance Commissioner Steve Poizner, who lives in the hills above Los Gatos, offered these tips:

■ Keep an up-to-date list of your belongings, and take pictures or video of them. A guide for taking home inventory is available at www.insurance.ca.gov/0100-consumers/0060-information-guides/0040-residential/upload/Home-Inventory-Guide.pdf.

■ Keep receipts of your major belongings and insurance policy documents in a safe place, such as a work office or relative's house.

■ Let your insurance company know of any major recent purchases so you're fully insured.

Mercury News Staff Writer Denis C. Theriault contributed to this report. Contact Mike Zapler at mzapler@mercurynews.com or (916) 441-4603.

video rentals instead of the normal barbecues and volleyball games. The Santa Clara County Public Health Department offered advice on how to know if it's safe to go outside.

Q Is smoke bad for me?

A If you are healthy, usually you are not at major risk of illness from smoke.

Q What should I do to protect myself?

A Use common sense. If it smells or looks smoky, stay indoors as much as possible. Do not exercise or do any strenuous physical activity outdoors.

Q How will I know if the smoke is affecting me?

A You may have a scratchy throat, cough, irritated sinuses, headaches, runny nose, upset stomach or stinging eyes. Children and people with lung disease may find it difficult to breathe as deeply or vigorously as usual.

Q Who is most at risk?

A People at greater risk of illness from smoke include people with heart or lung disease. Children and the elderly are also more vulnerable.

Q If my kids are healthy, can I let them go out and play?

A No. If you can see or smell smoke, it is best to keep children indoors.

Q My eyes are itchy and stinging from the smoke. What should I do?

A First, try rinsing your eyes with clear, cool water. You can also try using eye drops. If you continue to have a problem, call your medical provider.

Q Should I still have a barbecue this weekend?

A If there's still heavy smoke in the air over the weekend, having a barbecue will make the air worse in your area.

Q Once inside, should I run my air conditioner?

A Once indoors, keep your windows, doors and vents closed. If you have an air conditioner, run it. Close the outside air intake, or decrease the outside air exchange to a minimum of 20 percent.

THE SUMMIT FIRE

FIRE | Governor visits

Continued from Page 1A

least 28 structures, including 17 residences. By Friday evening, it was 25 percent contained.

"There is still an awful lot of work to do," Cal Fire spokesman David Shew said, "but the weather is in our favor and we are pretty confident that we will be able to keep it to its current size and it will be 100 percent contained within a few days."

Still, the mercurial nature of the wind remained the central factor in a drama playing out across the charred mountainsides, where hundreds of residents faced yet another sleepless night of worry, and down into the smoky Santa Clara Valley, where the acrid stink of burning wood promises to linger throughout the Memorial Day weekend.

Near tiny Corralitos, many residents were keeping up their desperate vigil as firefighters beat back the fire's southern edge. Down in Santa Clara County, schoolchildren were being kept inside to escape the ever-expanding billows of smoke. But the shift in wind — off the ocean — put particular pressure on the eastern, artificial perimeter of the blaze along Summit Road.

Crews were forced to protect areas that had previously seemed secure. In one spot, flames popped over Summit Road, igniting 50 acres of chaparral. In another, farther south on Summit Road near Pole Line Drive, afternoon winds pushed flames up the accordion-pleated canyons toward ridge-top homes.

"It's all about wind speed and direction," said Mike Virden, a "strike team leader" from Fresno. "You need to react to every change."

His team had been cutting fire lines by hand. The thick smoke made it too difficult for helicopters to fly through dumping water and fire retardant.

Homeowner Norma Nohrden, who returned Friday,



MARIA J. ÁVILA — MERCURY NEWS

Fire crews use bulldozers to create a barrier for the Summit fire, which had chewed through more than 3,200 acres and destroyed 28 structures as of Friday evening.



'All we were concerned about was just getting out alive'

FAMILY RETURNS

was relieved to find her house still standing in the South Summit community. Her home includes a hot tub overlooking the canyons and a view of the bay. She bought it in 2002, one month before the Croy fire ravaged 34 homes.

"It's a beautiful place, it's very calm," said Nohrden, who evacuated Thursday morning, "but it's not for the faint-of-heart."

By afternoon, the winds around Corralitos had increased, said Santa Cruz County sheriff's Sgt. Fred Plageman. Instead of the soft eastern wind that had helped firefighters, air began moving to the south and the west, propelling flames over one fire line at Ramsey Gulch. *

Officials were starting to notify residents along Hazeldell, Green Valley Road, Old Mount Madonna Road, the top of Smith Road, and Casserly Road that those streets were "threatened." No evacuations were in place, but anyone with livestock was urged to make plans to move it.

Friday also brought fresh anxiety for dozens of displaced residents of Corralitos. Many had gathered around a sheriff's sergeant at noon, shouting out their addresses, wanting to know whether their houses were saved.

"What about Buzzard's Lagoon," one woman called out. "Know anything about Tindall Ranch?"

"Anything on Upper Highland?"

The fire was spotty at Buzzard's Lagoon, Plageman said. Some houses were affected, Tindall Ranch and Upper Highland were hit.

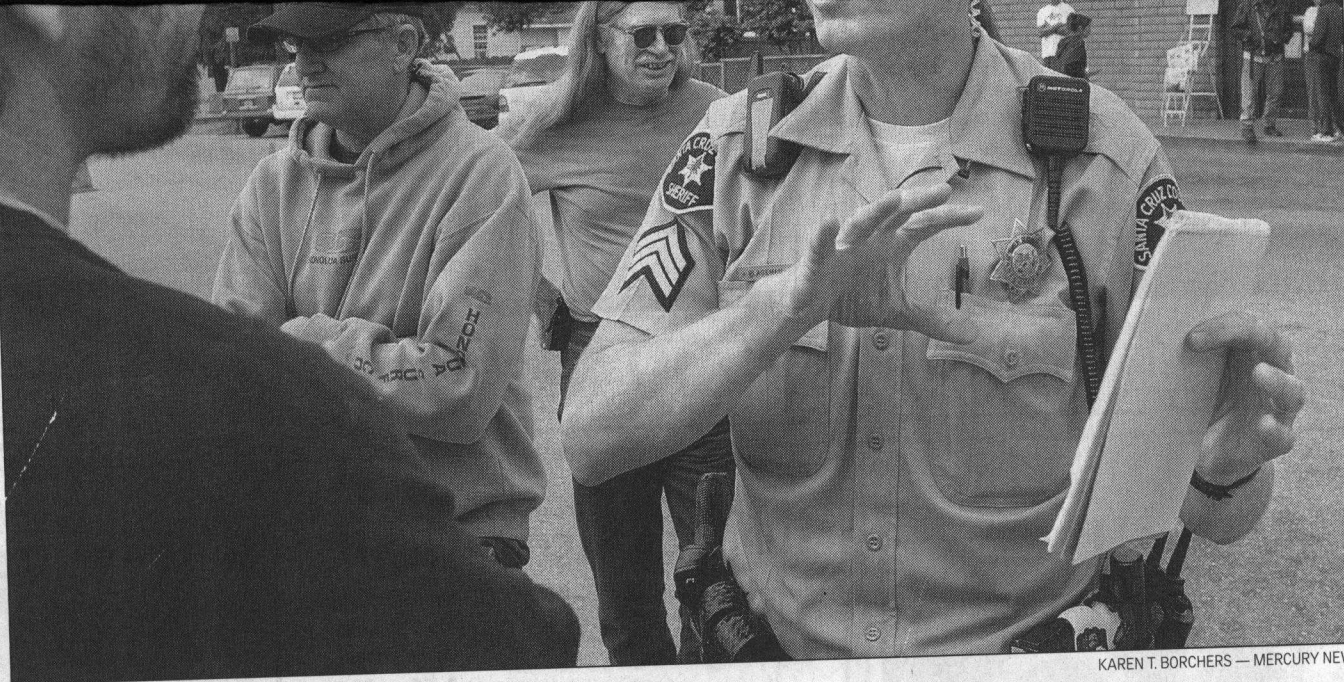
But he gave no specifics, except this: "We're not letting anyone in."

For a second day, the evacuees gathered in the Little Corralitos Plaza, across from the market, commiserating about what's left of their lives.

Marissa Miranda, 22, whose mom lives on Dove Lane in Corralitos, was feeling optimistic early in the day that her home would be OK. But by 1 p.m., Miranda said through tears that she thinks her mother's street is on fire and is lost. Authorities won't let her family up there, though, for safety reasons, to find out for sure.

"We're struggling," she said. "This is really hard."

Expressing sympathy for the approximately 1,000 evac-



KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS

Santa Cruz County sheriff's Sgt. Fred Plageman in Corralitos reports the conditions of neighborhoods Friday.

uees left to worry and watch as the fire rages, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger made an hourlong appearance at base camp in Gilroy's Christmas Hill Park on Friday morning.

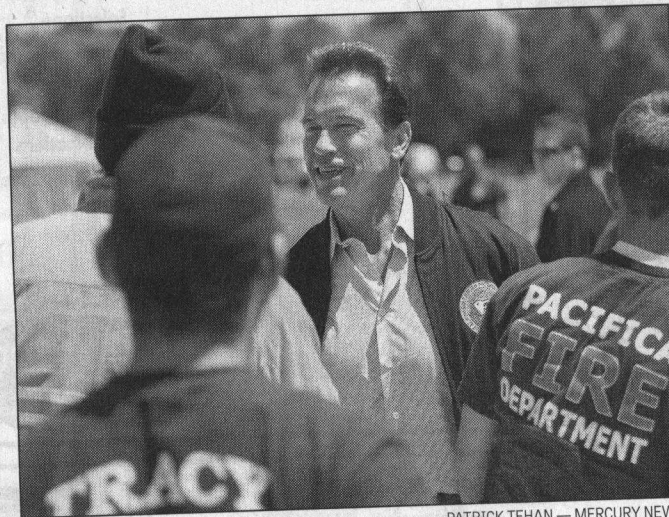
He asked questions about the shifting wind during a quick briefing and held an equally brief news conference. Before leaving, he greeted some of the dozens of firefighters streaming back into camp, their faces blackened by soot.

"Our hearts go out to anyone who lost property," Schwarzenegger said, "a home, or animals or anything else."

When the governor was driven to the south end of the camp, toward the chow lines, dozens of weary firefighters were grabbing their first sit-down meals in more than a day. He shook hands with several of them, filing through the rows of picnic tables laden with Pop-Tarts, scrambled eggs with cheddar cheese and salsa, bacon and sausages.

One firefighter impressed the governor with his muscles. "I think he's taking his dumbbells up there and doing a few curls," the former Mr. Universe replied.

"It was a long night," said Woodside firefighter Don Bullard, who sat down to eat with Menlo Park firefighter Tony Eggimann. "We call it billy goat country, because it's so steep and rocky. I'm ready for a nap."



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger visits some of the 2,683 firefighters Friday at their base camp at Christmas Hill Park in Gilroy.

Neither of them had seen this kind of fire this early in the year and in this location. Bullard was resigned to a long firefighting season:

"We're going to be out a lot this year," he said. "Hold onto your hats."

With winds so unpredictable, they weren't even sure what the weekend would hold, let alone the rest of the long, dry summer.

"We could even go back out tonight," Eggimann said. "You never know."

Volunteers were fighting alongside the professionals near Summit Road and Pole Line Drive, working to save a community of multimillion-dollar homes with views of the

Pacific Ocean.

"We're homeowners. We're literally saving our own homes," said Reid Wilburn, 38, one of 15 volunteers from the Ormsby Fire Brigade, as he laid hose. "We know where the wells are."

One homeowner volunteered a pond filled with 300 koi. Another offered up his 5,000-gallon water tank.

But the size, speed and ferocity of the flames were no match for the volunteers. Around each house, bulldozers rushed to clear a wide berth of vegetation. Men running with chain saws toppled dangerous trees. Pumping trucks sent water to extinguish windblown embers that

flared up into 30-foot flames.

Sentries stood on knolls above each crews, ready to alert them to any wind gusts and suddenly shifting flames that could trap and kill.

"They are amazing," said homeowner David Tynn. "Every square inch of my property burned — 11 acres. Flames came right up to my deck. But the house was saved."

As of Friday night, 2,683 firefighters had been tapped from across the state, and even from Nevada, to fight the blaze. State fire officials using more accurate mapping techniques Friday morning revised down previous estimates of the fire's acreage.

More than 250 engines, have been dispatched, Shew said. So far, the fire has cost \$1.72 million to fight, he added. No injuries were reported.

Matt McElhinny, a 16-year veteran from Mendocino County who'd spent the last 20 hours battling the blaze, was bracing himself to work through the Memorial Day weekend.

"Someone has it off," he said, "but it's not us."

Mercury News Staff Writers Sharon Noguchi, Lisa Fernandez and Julia Prodis Sulek contributed to this report.

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TO CHIMNEY, RUBBLE

By John Woolfolk

Mercury News

Their two llamas, Gringo and Lele, survived the fire. So did some of their chickens and rabbits and their garden of lettuce, tomatoes and corn.

But Barry and Jennifer Wothers returned at noon Friday to their home on a Summit Road ridge overlooking Monterey Bay to find only a chimney surrounded by smoldering rubble.

"We're going to rebuild," Jennifer Wothers, 55, said, clutching an unlighted cigarette. "It's just too damn pretty up here."

The couple were among the lucky ones who had plunked down the steep premiums for homeowner insurance. Plus, Barry Wothers, 51, is a builder and has lots of friends in the trade.

But it's never easy to see your dream reduced to ruin.

"I think I cried it all out yesterday," Jennifer Wothers said.

Her husband has owned the property since 1978. They built their home and raised their 15-year-old son there.

"Thirty years of hard work..." she said.

The Wothers were eating breakfast Thursday when they saw the raging Summit fire bearing down on their home.

"The whole section was solid, brown-gray smoke," she recalled.

"I didn't grab too many things, like picture albums," she said. "You don't think clearly when you're panicky. I grabbed my two dogs, four cats and my son. I wasn't even thinking about the picture albums. I should have grabbed them because they're irreplaceable. All we were concerned about was just getting out alive."

They stayed with a daughter in Santa Cruz overnight.

It wasn't the Wothers' first brush with wildfire. The Croy fire a few years ago came close — too close. It persuaded them to replace their shingle roof with tile.

But the fireproofing measure couldn't resist the Summit fire.

"It's a hard place to live," Jennifer said.

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