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Decade marked by disasters

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SANTA CRUZ — For the fourth time this decade, Santa Cruz County has been hit by disaster.

On Jan. 3, 1982, a massive Pacific storm brought torrential rain. Streams rose, bridges snapped and whole mountainsides came down.

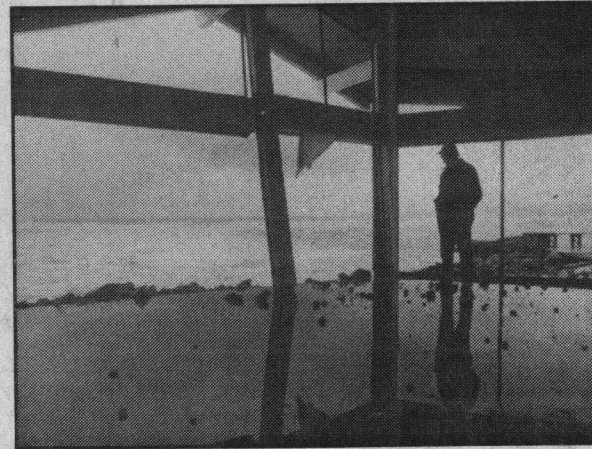
Twenty-two people died. Damage to property topped \$100 million.

A year later, a savage sea storm hurled monstrous waves at the county's coastline. Beachfront homes and restaurants were blown apart and swept away. Helicopters plucked panicking residents off bluffs which soon gave way. Damage topped \$30 million.

In the summer of 1985, a fire broke out on a hillside near Lexington Reservoir in Los Gatos.

Horried Santa Cruz County residents watched through the night as a distant glow grew and grew until it was burning wildly in their own backyards. Nearly 14,000 acres were scorched. The price tag for that disaster was about \$14 million.

And then last week, an earthquake by which all now will be measured again brought the to its knees.



Sentinel file

Disasters included floods of 1982, sea storm of 1983 and the fires of 1985.

Five more people from the community perished. U.S. Rep. Leon Panetta, D-Monterey, said Friday that damage could reach \$1 billion.

"Obviously when you have four disasters in seven

years, that's just too much. The statistics are way outside statistical norms," said county Supervisor Robley Levy.

"Since Santa Cruz County has been through these

other disasters, we've come to learn that the first line of responsibility is the individual," she said.

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"You assist your family and your neighbors and then you get assistance by the government," she said.

"I'm really proud of the citizens of this area," said Central Fire Chief Steve Negro.

"They really tried to help themselves. They shut off their own gas and power and water when needed.

"In the first 36 hours after the earthquake, we answered 121 calls. I think every one was a real emergency," he said.

"In my neighborhood, people were pooling food and cooking together. Everybody was looking after each other," said City Councilman John Laird.

"I think it gives some per-

spective.

"Issues that divided people a week ago are now real minor in the scheme of things," he said.

"When everybody has to pull together like this, there are no divisions.

"There are divisions when people don't understand something or aren't sympathetic toward each other.

"Everybody understands what happened Tuesday and everyone is sympathetic in this kind of situation," Laird said.

"We don't think about Santa Cruz being a small town anymore because there are 200,000 people, but this really brings us back to the concept of neighbors and small town," said Paul Bellina, program

manager for crisis and acute services with county mental health.

"If there is a silver lining to this it's that we end up finding out that people we don't even know care about us and vice versa," he explained.

Each disaster has brought its own kinds of problems, but Sheriff Al Noren said the earthquake was most demanding because the devastation was immediate.

"When we were hit by the waves, we had some time. We couldn't hold them back but we had some time to evacuate," Noren said. "In an earthquake, you're just right in the middle of it."

Chief Negro was incident commander for Soquel Fire District when Soquel Creek overflowed its

banks and flooded the town back in 1982. That disaster, he said, presented more problems because it was the first and there was little pre-planning.

Central Fire has now done extensive disaster planning. "This time we were ready and working when we went out the door," Negro said.

The earthquake has done the most damage to the city of Santa Cruz, said councilman Laird, because, as he said, "it struck at the mall — the soul of the city."

"When the Soquel Avenue bridge came down (in the storm of '82), it was an inconvenience, but it wasn't the soul of the city, or its economic base," he said.