

December freeze left many victims

By LARAMIE TREVINO
STAFF WRITER

While December's freeze may be a fading memory at the height of summer, its delayed impacts on Pajaro Valley residents are clear to Santa Cruz County officials.

Because demands for employment, housing, food-assistance and other emergency services traceable to the cold spell are on the rise, County Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello has asked the state for establishment of a local Disaster Application Center. The center would assist eligible families in gaining access to federal assistance.

In a July 31 letter to Vince Montane of the state's Office of Emergency Services, Mauriello backs up the reasons for seeking a DAC, which officials last spring believed there was no local need for.

But beginning in June, Mauriello points out in a July 29 memorandum to Human Resources Agency Administrator Will Lightbourne, community groups began voicing their concerns over freeze impacts on their clients.

At a July 27 freeze-disaster relief meeting held at Watsonville City Hall, Frank Kishton of FEMA informed the 20 people assembled of money that can be used as a block grant for county groups. The \$1.7 million Cora Brown Fund provides help with utilities, rent, and other needs of disaster victims.

In February, Santa Cruz was among the counties President Bush declared disaster areas because of the freeze, a move that allowed the county to tap into federal aid.

Following last month's gathering of service providers and community representatives, also attended by Congressman Leon Panetta, officials learned:

- Catholic Charities had a waiting list of 150 to 200 individuals needing rental assistance;

- The Second Harvest Food Bank found monthly requests for

food supplements for March through June increased 109 percent compared with the same period last year;

- Approximately 250 unemployment claims were filed with the Employment Development Department because of the freeze;

- One packing house reported its normal work force has a 3-month peak with 10-hour shifts and is currently operating on a 2-month peak schedule with shifts of less than eight hours per day, and,

- Workers affected by local employment patterns find it difficult to make applications using the 800 telephone number of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and need help with documents.

The nearly \$3 million in agricultural losses resulted in reduced employment for the flower industry, as well as in broccoli, spinach and other commodities.

Steve Siri, a flower grower and past president of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, blamed the freeze for setting back harvest timetables by a month or two.

And it came in a bad market period, he said. No bunchers or packers were hired, since, "We just picked the stuff and threw it away," he said.

Next door at Kitayama Bros. nursery, Siri said the "acres and acres" of baby's-breath was wasted since it came in after Mother's Day.

Back in January, when damages wrought by the disaster were still surfacing in the agricultural community, Santa Cruz County Deputy Agricultural Commissioner Rick Bergman speculated correctly the No. 1 crop in the valley, strawberries, would get a slow start.

As a result of frosty temperatures dipping into the low teens, one month's worth of Castroville's artichoke harvest, amounting to \$7 million, was lost. In Monterey County, crops were damaged to the tune of \$20 million.