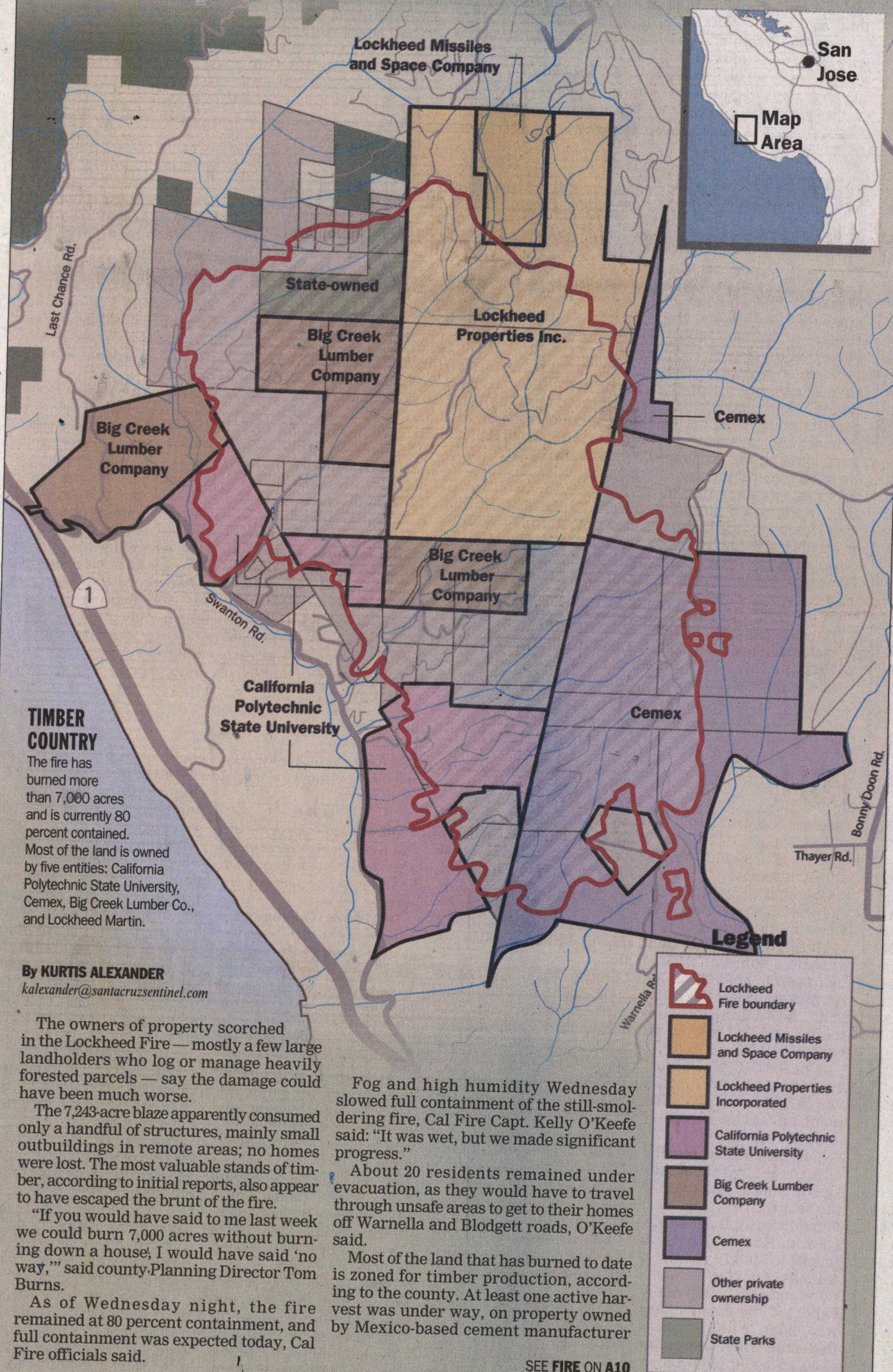


Could have been worse

Property owners, timber companies count their blessings



TIMBER COUNTRY

The fire has burned more than 7,000 acres and is currently 80 percent contained. Most of the land is owned by five entities: California Polytechnic State University, Cemex, Big Creek Lumber Co., and Lockheed Martin.

By **KURTIS ALEXANDER**
kalexander@santacruzsentinel.com

The owners of property scorched in the Lockheed Fire — mostly a few large landholders who log or manage heavily forested parcels — say the damage could have been much worse.

The 7,243-acre blaze apparently consumed only a handful of structures, mainly small outbuildings in remote areas; no homes were lost. The most valuable stands of timber, according to initial reports, also appear to have escaped the brunt of the fire.

"If you would have said to me last week we could burn 7,000 acres without burning down a house, I would have said 'no way,'" said county Planning Director Tom Burns.

As of Wednesday night, the fire remained at 80 percent containment, and full containment was expected today, Cal Fire officials said.

Fog and high humidity Wednesday slowed full containment of the still-smoldering fire, Cal Fire Capt. Kelly O'Keefe said: "It was wet, but we made significant progress."

About 20 residents remained under evacuation, as they would have to travel through unsafe areas to get to their homes off Warnella and Blodgett roads, O'Keefe said.

Most of the land that has burned to date is zoned for timber production, according to the county. At least one active harvest was under way, on property owned by Mexico-based cement manufacturer

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FIRE

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Cemex, and the small logging crew there was forced to evacuate. The trees at the logging site are believed to have been spared, Cal Fire officials now say.

Cemex, one of the area's largest landowners, estimates it owns about 1,000 forested acres within the perimeter of the fire. Big Creek Lumber Co., a family-owned logging operation based in Swanton, estimates it, too, owns at least 1,000 acres where the fire has burned. California Polytechnic State University, which operates Pacific Ranch, which also is logged, owns significant property in the burn area, too, though how much is unclear.

The companies say damage has been limited because of the fire's relatively slow spread.

"The most impacted was the understory," or low-lying vegetation, said Jennifer Borgen, a spokeswoman for Cemex. The larger trees, though some were scarred, are mostly intact, she said, especially fire-resistant redwoods.

Cal Fire officials estimate 90 percent of the redwood in the burn area weathered the flames.

Longtime forester and Big Creek owner Bud McCrary said his biggest concerns are Douglas firs and the younger trees that are not so valuable now but will be

in the future. The loss for his company, which owns several parcels above Swanton on the west side of the burn area, is too early to quantify, but McCrary said it would be "fairly substantial."

In addition to redwood, fir and Monterey pine are logged in the region, but at significantly less value.

Timber stands in the Santa Cruz Mountains are typically harvested every 10 to 20 years.

Defense contractor Lockheed Martin estimates it owns about 1,500 acres in the burn area. The company does not log the land, a spokesman said, though the defense contractor does "thin" trees to reduce the fire threat.

Chip Manor, the Lockheed Martin spokesman, described the company's work in the Santa Cruz Mountains as testing parts for submarine-launched missiles for the U.S. Navy. The 3,800-acre campus includes 30 office and manufacturing buildings plus 70 support structures, he said. None of the Lockheed buildings were damaged by fire.

The fire, which started Aug. 12 at a yet-to-be disclosed location on private property, was dubbed the Lockheed Fire by Cal Fire officials because of its proximity to the company's facilities.

The fire also swept through a 60-acre parcel owned by California State Parks, a plot considered part of Big Basin Redwoods

but not contiguous with the main park. State Parks officials said the area's primary vegetation, knobcone pine, gold cup oak and manzanita, was ripe for burning and, in fact, requires it for reproduction.

Though the fire is far from extinguished, it is mostly contained and firefighters don't expect it to spread to new areas.

Interspersed within the larger properties that burned are about a dozen or so smaller properties owned mostly by private individuals. No significant development is believed to be on these lands.

Valerie and Mike Corral, who own a property off Swanton Road that partially burned, lost a small "meditation" cabin, they said, but didn't lose their house, a graveyard or a pot garden used to fill orders at the Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical Marijuana, which the couple founded.

"I'm grateful to still have the things that I have," Valerie Corral said. "Without the firefighters, I wouldn't have a home right now."

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