

✓ Cave fire prompts dangerous search

CAVES

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SANTA CRUZ — Firefighters probed the smoky depths of a cave near Empire Grade Road for 2½ hours Tuesday afternoon following reports people may be trapped inside, blocked by a fire.

"We've yelled and haven't heard anything and searched it pretty thoroughly, working our way back through a number of tunnels," said UC Santa Cruz fire captain Mike Quinton.

It was presumed those inside either escaped before authorities arrived, or were far back enough into the cave, known as Empire Cave, to breathe cleaner air than that near the entrance, where the fire began.

The fire was reported a little after 3 p.m. by various parties, including one man who had intended to explore the cave with his children, Quinton said.

University police questioned and

photographed five people who were seen leaving the cave, and one person on the other side of Empire Grade Road, shortly after the fire was reported.

The explorers told police there may have been between two and four people still inside beyond where the fire started, but the firefighters-turned-spelunkers found nothing to substantiate those reports.

Empire Grade Road was closed to traffic in both directions, but was eventually reopened as the search wore on.

The cave, 200 to 300 feet long, according to knowledgeable cavers, is the most easily accessible of some 10 caves in Cave Gulch, with a cement entrance and a metal ladder leading to a cavern below.

The fire, which was quickly extinguished, was fueled by debris inside the cave and wood and branches that been brought inside, Quinton said.

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Firefighters, equipped with oxygen tanks, probe smoke-filled cave entrance.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Firefighters use exhaust fan to suck smoke from cave.

Cave fire closes road

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After setting up fans to help clear the air, the firefighters, including Bonny Doon search and rescue volunteers and Santa Cruz Fire Department personnel, set up portable lights and donned breathing apparatus to search for possible victims.

UC Santa Cruz firefighter Dave Henley and Bonny Doon volunteer Anthony Cefaloni were the first of several two-man crews that would spend about 10 minutes inside, tethered to ropes, before using up their stores of portable oxygen.

Several firefighters on the scene recalled spending time in the cave in earlier times. From their memories, the rescue crews were able to fashion a makeshift diagram of its interior.

The search was called off at 5:48 p.m.

The cave is commonly visited by UC Santa Cruz students, day hikers and transients. A trip to caves in the gulch is known to be a quarterly ritual for UC Santa Cruz dormitory residents.

Beer bottles and debris were strewn about the area outside. Graffiti littered the concrete entrance and large cavern immediately below.

At one time, the entrance was apparently sealed off, Quinton said, but the concrete seal was broken long ago, judging from the moss-encrusted broken edges.

University spokeswoman Stephanie Hauk acknowledged the difficulty of keeping the area free of trespassers.

"The campus is open to the public and therefore people very often come on and we can't control everything," she said. "Of course it's a concern. No one is supposed to be in those caves."

In addition, she said, the university did not want to limit the access of true cave enthusiasts be-

cause of the actions of a careless few.

"Probably what this does say to us is we're going to need to take a look at the security of the cave and we'll have to deal with that," she said. "We certainly don't want anyone hurt. But on the other hand the environmental concerns around that area need to be taken care of too."

"They tell me there are caves in that area that are get fairly regular use by people wanting to have a cave experience and there are other caves that haven't received that much use," she said. "And the spelunkers who have been in the area for a while really seem to feel those caves are valuable."

Luther Perry, a member of the San Francisco Bay chapter of the National Speleological Society, and director of information services for Santa Cruz County, said even though the cave was well used, the smoke from the fire would still damage the interior.

Past clean up efforts at the site have netted 700 to 800 pounds of garbage, he said.

"It's quite common for people to do things like haul lumber and try to build fires or haul mattresses and sleep inside," he said.

He said it would be impractical to try to seal the cave.

"People have made efforts to seal the cave and others, but people break in as fast as they seal them off," he said. "It's just not practical, it would help a whole lot if people would be a bit more careful."

He described the Empire Cave as one that is "not particularly dangerous" and said true cave enthusiasts would not think of starting a fire inside.

"We (cavers) try to talk to people and maintain awareness of the special protections they need and hope there aren't too many irresponsible people around."