

UNCONTAINED



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Firefighters are dwarfed by backburn flames as they defend a fire line along Molino Creek Farm Road in the face of the advancing Lockheed fire Thursday.

Bonny Doon residents flee — once again

By John Boudreau
Mercury News

The fire drill went like this: The first call at 6 a.m. was just a warning. Be prepared to flee. The second one at midday Thursday was mandatory and ominous. Get Out Now.

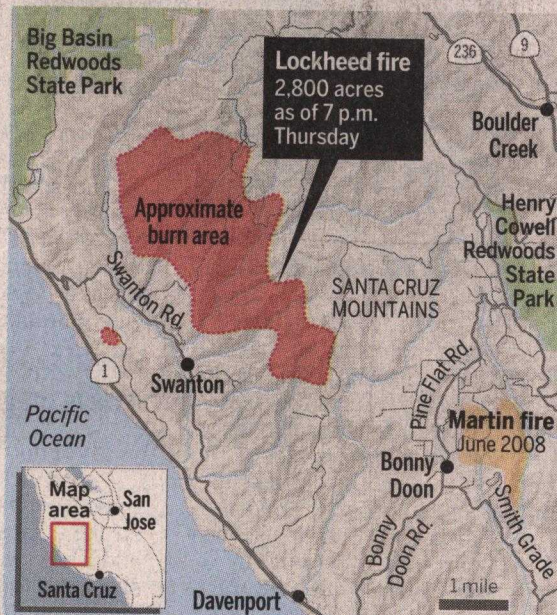
As a blanket of brown-gray smoke blotted out the blue sky, Bonny Doon residents gathered together the irreplaceable — family photos and pets. Then they charged down the twisting Bonny Doon Road toward the coast. Again.

A year ago, another blaze roared from the summit to the sea here, consuming 600 acres and burning 10 homes.

"Sadly, this is a routine," said a slightly frantic Gary Young, who

Larger than last year's Martin fire

Although Thursday's Lockheed fire is three times larger than last year's nearby Martin fire, far fewer homes and people are directly threatened in this sparsely populated area of the Santa Cruz Mountains.



Source: California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, Google Maps
MERCURY NEWS

Santa Cruz wildfire scorches thousands of acres as firefighters race against time to gain control

By John Woolfolk, Ramona Turner
and J.M. Brown
Bay Area News Group

Firefighters from across the state are converging on the Santa Cruz Mountains, racing to contain the region's first major wildfire of the season before a weekend heat spell arrives.

Flames have already scorched nearly 3,000 densely wooded acres and forced thousands in the Bonny Doon area to flee their homes for a second time in little more than a year.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection ordered 100 fire engines from around the state to the scene Thursday morning as the flames bore down on homes. Nearly 700 firefighters were battling the blaze by evening.

"There are a number of fires throughout the state, but this fire has a large number of residents and homes threatened," said CalFire spokesman



KAREN T. BORCHERS — MERCURY NEWS

Bonny Doon area resident Barry Porter packs up guitars and a teddy bear after being ordered to evacuate his home Thursday.

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"There are a number of fires throughout the state, but this fire has a large number of residents and homes threatened. Any time we have this kind of population at risk, we take it seriously and make sure to have resources on hand to protect residents and property."

— Daniel Berlant, Cal Fire spokesman



PAUL CHINN — SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE VIA AP

Winds blow smoke from the Lockheed fire out toward the Pacific Ocean near Bonny Doon on Thursday, as the blaze scorched thousands of acres.

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Fire

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Daniel Berlant. "Any time we have this kind of population at risk, we take it seriously and make sure to have resources on hand to protect residents and property."

What state fire officials are calling the Lockheed fire was first reported at 7:16 p.m. Wednesday in the redwood forests near Empire Grade and Bertoli Drive and the coastal town of Swanton northeast of Bonny Doon, a town nestled in the redwoods and known to visitors for its winemaking and nearby nude beach. By Thursday evening, the fire had burned thousands of acres, threatened more than 1,000 homes and other structures and forced some 2,000 residents to flee.

Davenport residents were stoic as they mingled downtown near the post office after firefighters ordered them to leave their homes.

"When you live in fire country," said Vera McLean, "you have to be prepared."

The fire was not contained Thursday, and its cause remains under investigation. There were no confirmed reports of injuries or structures lost.

Temperatures reached the mid-80s in the coastal mountains Thursday with steady northwest winds at 13 mph and gusts up to 20 mph that were expected to continue through the night and into today, said National Weather Service meteorologist Steve Anderson. Humidity was as low as 50 percent in the mountains.

Firefighters were struggling to gain control of the blaze before an expected rise

in temperatures and further drop in humidity this weekend, when weather forecasters say temperatures in the mountains will reach the 90s. Prevailing winds were blowing the fire toward Bonny Doon.

Gray-brown plumes of smoke billowed high into the sky above the Santa Cruz Mountains, visible from San Jose.

"It's a lot of smoke," Anderson said. "You can see it from space."

But with prevailing winds blowing the smoke offshore, air quality officials in the San Francisco and Monterey Bay areas saw no need for health advisories.

"It looks like the trajectory of the smoke is going down the coast across the Bay and not really coming onshore," said Richard Stedman, director of the Monterey Bay Area Unified Air Pollution Control District. "It's not looking like a lot of impact at this point."

The tawny clouds were an eerie reminder of last year's record wildfire season, which got an early start with the Summit fire in May near the Santa Cruz and Santa Clara County borders and was followed weeks later by fires in or near Bonny Doon, Watsonville and Big Sur. Despite a third year of drought, fire season has been relatively mild this year.

For Bonny Doon residents, Thursday's evacuations came just 14 months after the Martin fire torched 600 acres and destroyed 10 homes. Deputy sheriffs went door-to-door in Bonny Doon to tell people to leave their homes as the flames advanced.

"Don't wait 'til the last minute to get out of there," said Cal Fire Battalion Chief Julie Hutchinson from Riverside.

But Harold Poehler, who

lives on Carter Road in Bonny Doon, was refusing to obey the evacuation notice.

"I'm going to wait until it gets over that hill, then I'll run like hell," Poehler said. "But I don't think we have anything to worry about. I'm a trained firefighter, I can run a hose and I'll help out if they need me."

Residents of 250 homes near Davenport, along with 25 commercial buildings, were told to leave before the Bonny Doon evacuation order was issued.

The fire was in a low-moisture area with some large trees. Four planes and six helicopters were helping in the fight, as were on-ground firefighters from other areas.

An evacuation center has been established at the Vintage Faith Church at Highway 1 and Mission Street in Santa Cruz. A large animal evacuation center has been set up at the Santa Cruz County Fairgrounds in Watsonville, and a small animal evacuation center has been established at 7th & Rodriguez.

From atop Filice Ranch on Warnella Road, John Filice and his son, Anthony, watched the fire expand and begin to eat away on the western edge of their property Thursday morning. The 400-acre cattle and horse ranch has been in the family for 60 years, and the men weren't about to leave.

"I'll do what I have to do," John Filice said, "to fight it."

Santa Cruz Sentinel reporter Kurtis Alexander and Mercury News Staff Writers John Boudreau and Lisa Fernandez contributed to this report.

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KAREN T. BORCHERS SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS

Bonny Doon area residents Vera and Andy McLean stand outside their RV with their morning coffee Thursday after the wildfire forced them to flee their home. "We just picked up the house and left," said Vera McLean.

Bonny Doon

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stapled hastily made signs saying "house below" on a wooden fence along Bonny Doon Road.

He did not want firefighters to miss his house in the gulch below.

Last year, he and his neighbors could see and feel the flames that roared along nearby Martin Road.

"It was right there," Young said, "in your face."

Residents in this rural community 12 miles northwest of Santa Cruz know this is the price they pay to live among stately redwoods and just a few minutes from the great blue expanse of the Pacific Ocean.

"This is like paradise," Martha Zimet, a Microsoft program manager, said as she packed for her escape. "Just the basics — passports and pets," she said. "I didn't think it was that close."

Indeed, to look at the sky from one angle — northward — one saw only clear blue. Turn around, though, and the picture was different — a giant smoky cloud blotted out the clear air. Ash, like snowflakes, fell gently to the ground.

A caravan of fire trucks blasted up Bonny Doon Road

as residents raced in the opposite direction.

At one point, a panicked horse galloped up and down the road until resident Ryan Beauregard, owner of the Beauregard Winery, calmed the beast and returned it to a nearby ranch.

Sheriff's deputies, meanwhile, drove house-to-house to make sure everyone evacuated. "You've got to get out of here," one resident yelled to a reporter as she drove by in her car.

Before chasing down the horse, Beauregard calmly stood in front of his winery.

"We are just waiting, dude," he said. He had placed sprinklers on top of his tasting room to keep the roof wet, a thin line of protection from the raging blaze. His trucks were loaded and poised to blast down the hill. "We are waiting to see the flames; it's definitely getting close."

Last year, three wildfires charred the Santa Cruz Mountains. Some coastal residents take the evacuation in stride, or as best they can under the circumstances.

"When you live in fire country you need to be prepared," said Vera McLean, a 64-year-old resident of Davenport who had to leave her Swanton Road home after getting an 11 p.m. evacuation call Wednesday.

"Yesterday afternoon, I made the comment, 'This is fire weather.' You've got an offshore wind, no fog and we had another dry year."

She and her husband, 68-year-old Andy McLean, packed up their RV on Wednesday night and parked along the Pacific where they had a clear view of the ocean and a grove of Monterey cypress.

Microsoft programmer Zimet says she has no plans to ever leave the rustic community, even though she's had to face down the wilderness fires twice in little under a year.

"Absolutely not," she said, before leaving her Pine Flat Road home. "It's a great area. People are wonderful, and you have no neighbors."

Young, though, is not so sure. The artist, who teaches at UC Santa Cruz, has endured his share of natural disasters in the three decades he's lived in the neighborhood. A redwood tree crushed his home during an El Niño storm in 1998, and the Loma Prieta earthquake nine years earlier, opened up the ground beneath the house — snapping it in two.

As he spoke, his wife and two sons prepared to leave.

"If it burns down, I'm not building it again," he said. "Living here is real nice — if it doesn't kill you."



DAN COYRO — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

A firefighter holds his line against the advancing Lockheed fire in Davenport on Thursday.