

# Carbonero Creek spill concerns UCSC professor

## New cleanup crew takes over

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SCOTTS VALLEY — The company originally hired to clean thousands of gallons of gasoline out of Carbonero Creek has been removed from the job and replaced with another firm.

The first company was fired for moving too slowly, said a county government source who spoke on the condition he not be identified.

A UC Santa Cruz Environmental Studies professor says the effects of the gas spill could last for years, depending on how much gasoline seeps through soil on the creek banks and reaches groundwater.

According to UCSC professor Robert Curry, gasoline that seeps into the groundwater could rise back to haunt the creek year after year if the cleanup is not complete. With the current drought, Curry said it might be years before groundwater levels in the Carbonero Creek area rise high enough to bring the gasoline back.

"Then suddenly the fish start dying and everybody says 'Where did it come from?'" Curry said.

"These kinds of spills manifest themselves in a number of different ways," said San Lorenzo Valley Supervisor Fred Keeley. "One is you see fish floating dead on the water when it happens. The other is four months from now when you're in middle of the rainy season and the stuff comes back."

More than 4,000 gallons of gasoline poured into Carbonero Creek Aug. 29 as a result of a transport truck accident just south of the Mt. Hermon Road exit on Highway 17. The truck's trailer, owned by Petroleum Delivery Inc., overturned near a drainage ditch that led to the creek. The driver of the truck, who was uninjured, had just started working for the company the previous evening.

The accident caused the biggest fuel spill of at least the past 10 years, according to Sentinel files. Virtually all life in the creek, including thousands of small fish, perished when it came in contact with the gasoline.

Curry went with reporters to the cleanup site Friday to take soil samples, but was denied access to the creek by workers for NG Chemical Inc. who said they were now in charge of the cleanup. Workers from NG Chemical also barred reporters from viewing the cleanup work.

The workers said that the San Jose firm of Crosby and Overton Environmental Management had been taken off the cleanup two days earlier and NG, which is based in Santa Maria, had been brought in.

"The first group was simply

moving too slowly," said a knowledgeable county source.

Officials from the state Department of Fish and Game, the agency in charge of overseeing the cleanup, did not respond to repeated attempts to get a report on the known impact of the spill and the progress of the cleanup Friday and Saturday.

Curry's biggest concern is that the gasoline might reach groundwater level. Not because it would be likely to taint local water supplies — Curry said no major wells are pumping water from the area — but because the gas in the groundwater could rise again to kill off virtually all life in the creek.

Curry was also concerned about how much gas got past the cleanup site before the first substantial dam was set up to contain the fuel. He went to Branciforte Creek, which feeds off Carbonero, to test the water there. According to Curry, shellfish at the San Lorenzo river mouth could become poisonous if enough gasoline got downstream.

If the gas was well-contained, and if the amount that flowed past the cleanup site was small, the creek should be able to revive itself within a year, Curry said. Because the upper part of the creek above the drainage ditch which carried the gasoline was untainted, life forms there — everything from single-cell animals to insects and up the food chain — should be able to float downstream and repopulate the area that was devastated.

"Some single-cell critters come back real quick, others take longer," Curry said. "You would expect we could get fish back there within a year."

Still, Curry said, the question lingers as to whether those fish will later die as a result of hidden effects of the spill. According to county sources, an eventual settlement for damages to public lands will be reached between the county and Petroleum Delivery Inc., the trucking company, which has already acknowledged responsibility for cleanup costs.

That settlement will be based on how complete the cleanup and containment effort appears to have been.

"The county has to insist that those responsible for causing the degradation to a public water source be responsible for making the community whole again," said supervisor Keeley.

"We can't have simply a superficial cleanup. Making the community whole again means looking prospectively into the future and seeing what actions we need to take now to prevent future damage," Keeley said.