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Warren Levicoff

A palm tree in downtown Capitola becomes a refuge for two workers as water washes through the streets

Biggest waves in memory

By MARK BERGSTROM
Sentinel Staff Writer

Strong winds blowing across a wide area of the Pacific are generating the huge waves which have been pinging the Santa Cruz County coastline the past three days.

Only minor damage has been reported, at least compared to the devastation caused by a similar surge on Jan. 27.

Waves at high tide shortly before 1 a.m. today were the highest of the winter, according to Municipal Wharf supervisor Bill Eisele. The breakers crashed over the wharf, he said, taking out a few pilings, hand rails and bumper rails, Eisele reported.

The wharf was expected to be closed all day as a precaution, while crews waited for the surge to subside

so they can make a thorough examination of the structure.

Waves Tuesday carried a large log under the pilings of the Ideal fish restaurant at the entrance to the wharf. The log tore out water and gas mains, forcing closure of the restaurant.

The surf continued this morning to pound away at West Cliff Drive, where the cliffs and bike path eroded further.

Even though the roadway is closed in the area of Woodrow Avenue, Santa Cruz Police continued to have their hands full Tuesday afternoon with sightseers who climbed over barriers and onto the crumbling cliffs.

Capitola City Manager Steve Burrell said this morning waves again crashed over the beach wall and some water got into restaurants on the Esplanade, but damage was nothing

compared to the million-dollar loss suffered in January.

The battered Capitola Wharf held up overnight, Burrell said, confirming his suspicion that the heavy damage caused in January resulted from logs and other debris being tossed about in the surf.

Second (Aptos) Supervisor Robley Levy said she visited storm-torn Beach Drive in Rio del Mar at high tide early this morning and reported waves breaking up over the seawall. Windows were broken at a number of homes and others took on water, she said. Levy said she would return to the area at today's high tide at 12:35 p.m.

A sewer line was severed by wave action this morning in the Hidden Beach area of Aptos, causing sewage

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Mike Goidy peers out the door apartment at the Capitola Venetian Court as the waves beat down on him.

Coastal assault

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to spill into the bay near Cliff Drive, according to John Fantham of the County Sanitation District. Residents of the area have not lost sewer service.

Richard Lay, a marine forecaster with the National Weather Service, told The Sentinel this morning a deep low pressure center off the Central California Coast is creating a strong "setch," wind blowing over the water.

"Since the storm was almost stationary for the past few days, the wind has been blowing over a wide area and creating the large ocean swells," Lay explained.

The swell was running between 17 and 21 feet off the Central Coast at 7 a.m., he said. "These are abnormally higher than the usual storm swells," he said, adding, "these are the highest I can remember since I came here (to the area weather service) in 1966." Normal winter seas are between four and six feet, he explained, and normally rise to eight to 12 feet during storms.

The low pressure system, he said, appears to be weakening, which should give the coastline a respite on Thursday and Friday.

"However," he said, the jet stream is expected to shift again by Saturday morning. "If that happens we will be back into another period of bad weather."

The current series of storms has been propelled at the Central Coast by the jet stream, which has been on a direct westerly line from Japan.

The heavy wave action presents both short and longterm considerations for the coastline, according to Dr. Gary Griggs, UCSC geology professor and co-author of the textbook, "Geologic Hazards, Resources and Environmental Planning."

Immediate effects include the

rapid erosion of the seacliffs of up to 10 feet overnight, compared to the normal winter rate of six inches to a foot.

The wave action has been removing sand from the beaches, too, but that sand — at least some of it — will return this summer. "They may not be as wide as we've ever had," he explained.

The large amount of rain which has been falling steadily the past month is bringing more sediment than normal down the rivers and creeks. "That actually creates more sand," Griggs explained, but that won't appear on the beaches until the summer of 1984.

In addition to the cliff erosion, immediate problems are presented to beachfront developments, such as those at Seacliff, Pot Belly Beach and Rio del Mar.

Those areas, he said, have been particularly hard-hit this year because the waves have been coming in from the west and southwest, hitting those areas straight-on. Normally, the winds come in from the northwest.

Another problem area is Pajaro Dunes, where the wave action continues to eat up the sand dunes. "Our work there indicates they will be cut back drastically and then build back," Griggs explained.

The longterm consideration centers on climatic fluctuations. "People are just starting to look at that in the northern part of the state," he said. "There seems to me to be a definite trend to wetter winters and higher surf," he said.

Development of the California Coast, Griggs said, came during a mild climatic period. "We may have been lulled into complacency and now we may be seeing a change."

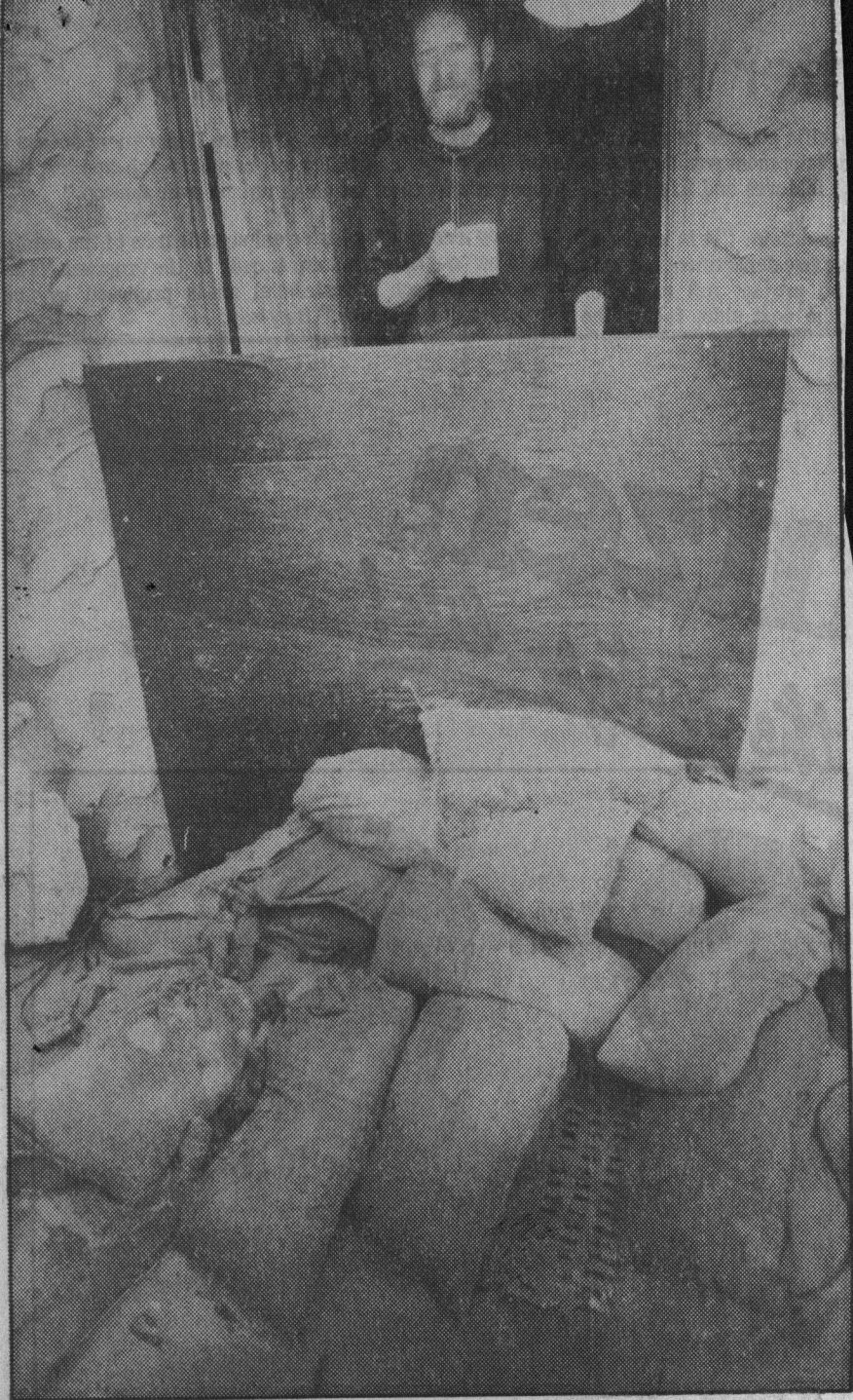
If the climate indeed is becoming wetter and the surf higher, salvaging beachfront homes and property will be an expensive proposition.

The San Lorenzo River licked the decks of homes in Felton Grove as rains continued to drench the area.



An unidentified man runs for cover as waves wash under a Beach Drive home

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel



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Mike Gooldy peers out the door apartment at the Capitola Venetian Court as the waves beat down on him.