

The Carmel Pine Cone

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Fire moves south and east, sparing Big Sur coast, Highlands



■ Illegal campfire was origin, officials say

By MARY SCHLEY

CAL FIRE investigators announced this week that an illegal campfire sparked the Soberanes Fire — a fire that began July 22 and was still raging in the wildlands Thursday at 51,000 acres and 27 percent containment.

The blaze, which has spread toward the south and east, away from the Monterey Peninsula and Highway 1, was set off of the side of a trail more than a mile up a canyon from Highway 1 in Garrapata State Park, and the resulting blaze has destroyed 57 homes and 11 outbuildings, according to the damage assessment team, and caused one death, when dozer operator Robert Reagan rolled his bulldozer while working at night in the Palo Colorado Canyon area.

Hikers discovered the fire in Soberanes Canyon but had to hike up to the top of the mountain to get a cell signal before they could report it, and San Benito-Monterey Unit Chief Brennan Blue told members of the media Aug. 2 that his team of investigators “spent 150 hours reviewing the scene and interviewing witnesses,” before arriving at their conclusion. Cal Fire investigator Richard Lopez reported the fire was set just off a lesser used fork of one of the park’s popular hiking trails.

Liability for damage

Monterey County District Attorney Dean Flippo pledged to support investigators in their efforts to find the person who lit the fire, and Sheriff Steve Bernal said his office “is here to support Cal Fire with any investigative resources or follow-up resources that they need.”

Cal Fire set up a hotline — (800) 468-4408 — for people to call with any tips, ideas or thoughts on who might be responsible for the wildfire, which isn’t anticipated to come under control until the end of August, at the earliest. Flippo said the person could be held criminally respon-

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Firefighters asked to keep tabs on water use

By KELLY NIX

IN THE Monterey Peninsula, where state bureaucrats try to keep track of every gallon of H₂O that’s consumed, even the water that’s being used to fight the Soberanes Fire is being accounted for.

Monterey Peninsula Water Management District general manager Dave Stoldt said this week that the

agency has requested that Cal Fire keep track of the water it uses to fight the massive wildfire that has killed a bulldozer operator and destroyed 57 homes and other structures.

“We have put Cal Fire on notice we want to [track] how much water is used for this effort,” Stoldt told The Pine Cone.

The decision to monitor usage for the firefighting effort, Stoldt said, was made in light of the State Water Resources Control Board’s order that requires utility California American Water to stop taking most of its water from the Carmel River.

“Under normal circumstances, the Peninsula is on a knife’s edge” in terms of water supply, Stoldt said. “So to throw in an emergency on top of it really means we have to make sure the community isn’t penalized. We totally support the firefighting effort — they can use all the water they want — we just want to make sure we count how much water is used.”

Once the amount is known, he explained, it will be reported to the state water board, which presumably will not penalize Peninsula residents for the consumption.

While it’s impossible to tally all the water being used for the effort, Stoldt said the district is focusing on the dozens of fire trucks that are filling up their tanks with water from Los Padres Reservoir and the Carmel River.

“There are 54 tenders deployed on the fire,” Stoldt said Wednesday. “We don’t know how many of those will use potable water, but we’ve put a request in to a

PHOTOS/MICHAEL TROUTMAN, DMT IMAGING

Farmers keep wary eye on ash and smoke

By ELAINE HESSER

EVEN IF you’re safely out of the path of the Soberanes Fire, you’ve probably experienced the fallout of ash and smoke from the blaze. So have grape growers and other farmers, not only in Carmel Valley, but in the Salinas Valley and beyond. So, what does all of that do to local gardens and crops?

According to Mike Vanderkarr at Valley Hills Nursery, the ash is unattractive and may discolor your plants’ foliage if you don’t wash it off, but it’s also made up of some of the same stuff you find in fertilizer, so overall, it’s not harmful. But even if your garden has received a good coating, he said not to skip feeding your plants on schedule, because the ash won’t

See **FARMERS** page 16A

Years of preparation couldn’t save homes in ‘The Canyon’

By CHRIS COUNTS

DESPITE COUNTLESS hours of prevention work by volunteer firefighters and residents, the swift-moving wildfire started by illegal campers June 22 destroyed 57 homes — all of them in Palo Colorado Canyon — dramatically illustrating the challenge of protecting homes in Big Sur’s most populous community from a blaze, even one that had been anticipated for years.

“I’ve always known that there would be a fire in Palo Colorado,” Mid-Coast Fire Brigade Chief Cheryl Goetz told The Pine Cone. “I just don’t think any of us realized it would be this big.”

Why did the fire destroy so many homes in Palo Colorado? In part, because there are more than 200 houses in the area, and nearly all the homes that were heavily damaged or destroyed were located at higher elevations and along lengthy dirt roads where they were particularly vulnerable to fire.

Another factor that made the blaze so destructive was that a major wildfire hadn’t penetrated deep into the area since the 1950s. As a result, the brush was much more dense and combustible than it would have been if fires hadn’t been suppressed for more than half a century.

What people refer to as “The Canyon” is actually four canyons — Palo Colorado Road leads to homes along Garrapata Creek, Palo

See **CANYON** page 17A

\$16K water bill stuns homeowners

By MARY SCHLEY

WHEN KELLIE Meyers received a postcard from California American Water warning her that too much water was being used at the home on Camino Real she and her husband own, she knew there was a problem. What Meyers wasn’t prepared for was the \$16,668.90 water bill she got — including a \$14,181.24 fee for May 7 to June 7, and \$2,487.66 for June 8 to July 8.

“My husband got the bill and almost had a heart attack,” Meyers said.

They’d already been working with the water company to reduce water use and check for leaks at the house following a few bills earlier in the year that exceeded \$1,000. They had also repaired a leak that caused a spike

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BILLING SUMMARY	
For Service To: CAMINO RL 13TH	
For Account 1015-2100197	
Prior Balance	
• Balance from last bill	-182.94
Balance Forward	-182.94
Current Water Service	
• Water Service Charge	10.06
• Water Usage Charge	
• 05/07/16 to 05/09/16	(\$0.64690000 x 4.20) 2.72
• 05/10/16 to 06/07/16	(\$0.64690000 x 40.68) 26.32
• 05/07/16 to 05/09/16	(\$1.50740000 x 4.20) 6.33
• 05/10/16 to 06/07/16	(\$1.45290000 x 40.68) 59.10
• 05/07/16 to 05/09/16	(\$3.90210000 x 4.20) 16.39
• 05/10/16 to 06/07/16	(\$3.79300000 x 40.68) 154.30
• 05/07/16 to 05/09/16	(\$7.91280000 x 4.20) 33.23
• 05/10/16 to 06/07/16	(\$7.69460000 x 40.68) 313.02
• 05/07/16 to 05/09/16	(\$10.21600000 x 118.79) 1,213.56
• 05/10/16 to 06/07/16	(\$9.83430000 x 1,148.32) 11,292.92
Total Water Service Related Charges	13,127.95

The water bill for this Camino Real vacation home went way beyond what was usual — and far beyond what anybody could anticipate — but no one is sure what happened to the more than 144,000 gallons that were supposedly used.

