Fire threatens city residents, causes university closure

At 9:00 Monday morning the situation in the City of San Luis Obispo could best be described as grim. Hundreds of residents had been evacuated earlier from the area above Cuesta Park over to San Luis Drive as flames shot high in the air. Highway 101 was eerily silent following its closure to all but emergency vehicles.

City residents keeping up to date on the fire via the Emergency Broadcast System were told not to use water, electricity or telephones except in emergencies and to stay off city streets to provide access to emergency vehicles.

At Cal Poly, the campus was deserted after classes were officially canceled. Students from the Carpenter Shop helped bulldoze the hill behind Yosemite Hall for a firebreak as billowing clouds of smoke threatened ominously over the mountain.

Residents lined streets in the city and neighbors congregated in groups watching firefighters battle the flames. Word came over the radio that additional areas to the southeast of the city were being evacuated as Orcutt Road and Broad Street became the fire's new "hot spots."

For a while, the atmosphere was tense as the news seemed to get worse. Later in the day, Gov. George Deukmejian would declare San Luis Obispo County a state disaster area.

Firefighters trying to keep flames from reaching the city had realized at 4 a.m. that the Lus Pileon fire would soon seriously threaten San Luis Obispo.

By 9 a.m. the blaze had skirted the south edge of town and moved into the Highett Road area. At this point, the city was in the greatest danger.

Residents living in the area above Cuesta Park over to San Luis Drive and Bullock Lane were among the first to be evacuated. Jack Duick, temporary fire information officer, and firefighters cleared approximately 4,000 people throughout the day, with the majority coming from the Monterey Heights vicinity.

Altogether, more than 2,000 firefighters, 10 percent of them women, have battled the blaze.

Dennis Arnold, a firefighter from the San Diego CDF Filmspring Forest Fire Station, had arrived in San Luis Obispo at 8 a.m. Saturday.

"I had two hours sleep in a motel and then they took us back out," Arnold said as he stood at the foot of San Luis Mountain. He was awaiting word to turn on the fire engine water pump to enable firefighters at the top of the mountain to wet down the ground so firefighters could stop the advancing flames.

Firefighters such as Arnold came from various parts of the state, including Kern and Santa Barbara counties. Depending upon jurisdiction, the United States Forest Service, California Department of Forestry, and the Department of the Interior have all been involved. The Cal Poly Fire Department is also said to have "helped extensively."

Despite conflicting reports, only one house within the city limits was extensively damaged. Several other structures were lost, though, including two barns, one garage and four chicken coops. In the Lopez Canyon area seven houses are said to have been destroyed along with numerous other structures.
Thank you, firefighters

Although the Las Pilitas fire continues to burn on Cuesta Ridge, the City of San Luis Obispo has been saved — thanks to the hard work of almost 2,000 California firefighters.

Fire departments from all over the state have been battling flames for more than a week between Santa Margarita and Lopez Lake — hampered by 100-plus degree weather at mid-week and freak thunderstorms that ignited spot fires on Saturday.

Local fire departments received aid from hundreds of firefighters from as far away as Los Angeles and Kern counties — despite fires in those areas — as falling ash and black smoke kept the fire constantly in the minds of city residents.

Camps were evacuated from Lopez Lake campsites, many unable to take their belongings with them, including boats and recreational vehicles. By Monday morning, thousands of residents living in the northeastern part of town were asked to leave their homes and possessions behind.

Even Cal Poly was mobilized, with the Emergency Operations Center called to service to prepare for the possibility of fire incinerating on campus and a fireline was cleared by agriculture students behind the residence halls.

We would like to join the community in extending our thanks to the many people who worked to keep our city safe. The telephone operators at Emergency Broadcast System kept us informed throughout the crisis, the San Luis Obispo Police Department kept the diverted traffic flowing as freely as possible, the Red Cross set up an evacuation center in Arroyo Grande and area volunteers answered the call to house evacuees and move their animals and belongings.

But most of all, we would like to thank the firefighters for their continuing efforts to quell the blaze. Without their tireless, round-the-clock work, San Luis Obispo would surely have been lost.

Reporters' notebook

By Julia Product

Special to the Mustang

I felt helpless as I listened to the Emergency Broadcast System Monday. Lists of people donating their homes and services inundated the air waves. But I didn't have room in my fire-free house for two adults, three children and a dog. I didn't have room in my yard for three horses, two sheep and twelve chickens. I didn't have a horse trailer or a pick-up truck to aid the evacuation victims of the fire. I didn't even have a garden hose.

So I volunteered for the American Red Cross. At six o'clock Tuesday morning, I went with my friend, a registered nurse, to Camp San Luis which is being used by the California Department of Forestry as a station for the firefighters. We walked into a converted storage shed filled with medical supplies and injured and exhausted firefighters and began the day.

Just as the hundred other Red Cross volunteers had grown accustomed to the sight of blistered hands and feet, cracking lips and the stench of old socks, to did my friend and I.

"I haven't taken these boots off for forty-eight hours," one weary firefighter warned me as I entered the tents. Admittedly, I hesitated as I pulled the boot off, taking a deep breath of air before the smell of two-day-old socks hit me in the face.

I peered the once white socks off and stood them against the leg of the folding chair. His feet were pink and blistered. The skin between his toes was cracked and bleeding. As an assistant to the nurse, I was given cleaning medication, gauze, Neosporin, and the everfaithful Band-Aids.

The firefighter said that his feet got so hot on the mountain that the rubber on his boot soles started to melt.

The worst part of the entire first aid procedure was pushing the same concrete socks back on the same tender feet.

Both men and women firefighters came in throughout the morning, some having just gotten back from fighting the blaze all night, others just awakened after a few hours of sleep.

English Department announces correction

Editor —

Thank you very much for your article explaining the problems of the English department in scheduling summer quarter classes. However, I would like to correct two errors: 1) The English department did not open another section of 310 (Corporate Communications); rather, it opened another section of 218 (Technical Writing). 2) It is not enough for a student to receive a "C" in one of the 300 courses which fulfill the Graduation Writing Requirement; he or she must also receive a "C" with a grade of B or better. If you have any questions, you may contact me or my Instructor.

MONA G. ROSENBAUM Interim Head, English Dept.
Poly closed to students two days this week

City-wide emergency threatens university

By Stacy Herkert

Traffic congestion, electrical power problems and the threat of the Las Pilitas fire reaching the Cal Poly campus were factors that led to the closure of the university on Monday and Tuesday.

Public Affairs Officer Don McCaleb said employees and students who lived in the Atascadero and Paso Robles area were having trouble reaching campus because Highway 101 was closed.

"We were also hit by an electrical power outage and officials of PG&E could not project how long it would be before they could return us to power," he said.

The decision to cancel classes was made Monday at about 6 a.m. when there was a definite threat from the fire, said McCaleb.

"When an emergency occurs the emergency operations center of the university is established involving a number of key people and the administration," McCaleb said.

McCaleb said employees and students of the university who were needed for specific tasks, such as plant operations and health care service, were put up and school employees were dismissed.

The only people remaining on campus were students in the residence halls, conference and workshop members and custodial employees of the university who were needed for specific tasks, such as plant operations and health care service.

Although Cal Poly was closed, fire-related activities continued. Food Services provided more than 10,000 sack lunches for firefighters, many of whom were housed in Yosemite Hall.

The decision to close the campus on Tuesday was made late Monday evening.

Fire first threatened the university over the weekend. "We had a fire on the university farm (Esquela ranch) Saturday afternoon from two different strikes of lightning," said McCaleb. The fire burned about 200 acres and was controlled after an 18 hours of work by the university fire crew and backup units.

The last emergency that closed the Cal Poly campus was in 1970. Severe rainstorms and flooding created electrical service problems for the university, and the school was closed for a day.

Fire safety is key to prevention

By Janet Haserot

Californians have experienced a rash of fires in the past 10 days but they are not alone. Firefighters have recently battled fires that have charred over 900,000 acres in 11 Western states and Canada.

With the high summer temperatures, fire prevention is at the forefront of concern for safety. Randy Bellow, a training officer for the Cal Poly Fire Department, said he urges people to practice good housekeeping techniques to prevent possible fire hazards.

"People need to get rid of excess trash, eliminate clutter and store things away from stoves and water heater," said Bellow.

Cal Poly is the only school in the 19 university system with its own fire department.

Please see page 8
A fire SLO won't forget

Close call for residents as firefighters save city

Two CDF firefighters watch the blaze Monday from the bottom of San Luis Mountain.

A firefighter fights fire as he helps start a backfire in Santa Margarita.

Mikko Helenius, 12, watches from his backyard as flames near his house on San Luis Mountain.
That’s got to be the longest night in history,” said Roger Grant as he relaxed in Yosemite Hall. “I saw fireballs coming down the hills breaking on Highway 101. I was afraid it would cross 101.

Grant, a fire captain for the Citrus Heights Fire District, had finally been given a break early Monday morning after spending 48 hours on the front lines.

“It was so smoky you couldn’t see,” he said. “My eyes are just about back to normal.”

Across the lounge, Fire Captain Dan Trabucco from Cayucos was recovering from the front lines. He had been on the same shift as Grant.

“This is a large fire, acreage-wise,” he said.

“So big, in fact, that he described it as probably the largest fire he and most of the other men had fought in their careers. See back page

Ed,” he said.

Photos by Margaret Apodaca and Ken Dintzer
Curry may face death penalty

By Michael Finucane

Death in the gas chamber or life imprisonment without the possibility of parole are the alternatives which the jury must decide between in the fate of convicted double murderer Kenneth Curry.

The panel of county residents found Curry guilty of killing two Cal Poly students under the special circumstance of multiple murders. The verdict was read last Wednesday, following four days of deliberations.

Stephen Karl Braun and Viola "Lulu" Ada were killed May 27, 1984 on Cuesta Ridge. Both had been shot once in the back of the head. Braun, 21, and Ada, 22, were natives of Lompoc, and long-time friends. Both were only a week away from graduation.

Curry, holding his hands to his face, showed no emotion as the verdict was read. He had repeatedly denied committing the murders during ten hours of taped interviews before the trial, but did not take the stand on his own behalf.

Particularly damning to Curry's case was the testimony of a state ballistics expert who identified a .22 Marlin rifle found in a locked box at Curry's home as the murder weapon.

During the penalty phase of the trial, character witnesses for the prosecution and the defense argued on behalf of preserving or taking the life of the 27-year-old Templeton man and former auto wrecker.

Tuesday, jurors saw five defendant's witnesses including Curry's mother Dorothy, and his wife Katherine Ann. Defense attorneys attempted to show Curry's learning disability branded him "stupid" by his peers while growing up, and that he was a good husband, father and worker.

On the other side of the aisle, Assistant District Attorney Daniel Hilford said he would "absolutely" seek the death penalty. Robbery and Curry's "infatuation" with Ada's body were cited as possible motives by the prosecution for the execution-style killings.

Braun's father, Karl, who attended the trial, said he was 'taking things for what they are' and that it was a shame the state was going for the death penalty, but that he would abide by the verdict.
Kenneth Curry listens to a verdict of ‘guilty’ as his two attorneys look on.

From page 6

...and he might offer testimony requesting the death penalty.

Addressing reporters after the verdict was announced, Braun said “Nothing’s going to bring the kids back, but it’s the best we can do to make sure he (Curry) doesn’t kill anyone else.”

It was thought Curry’s father might take the stand Wednesday, but court officials believed the case, but would await the outcome of the penalty phase before deciding a course of action.

To Linda, yes, I live downtown and I’ll love to stop by. Larry 543-3118
By Monday afternoon the worst of the crisis had passed, as 100 percent containment of the fire within city limits was announced. It was good news for the city, but there was still work ahead for weary firefighters — including a massive 10,000-acre backfire set Tuesday afternoon.

Firefighters received a hero's welcome from at least one San Luis Obispo resident who feels they deserve more recognition for a job well done.

Heart-shaped balloons, streamers and a "Thank You Firemen" sign decorated the house of Randy Ramos on the corner of California Boulevard and Hathway Street.

"The firemen are all so young ... they're just kids and such a long way from home," she said. "I think the whole town should be doing something and it's sad that they're not." she said. "If I would have had enough money I would have put ribbons and balloons around all these trees," she said, indicating the palm trees lining the boulevard.

According to Ramos, the mayor's office is planning to send letters of appreciation to all the people involved in the emergency.

"They're all so tired when they come by and so pooped out that they need the recognition," she said.

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Kinko's copies
Monday-Thursday 7:30am-8:00pm
Friday 7:30am-6:00pm
Saturday 10:00am-6:00pm
Sunday 12:00pm-5:00pm
973 Foothill Blvd. 543-0771

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From page 3

Below's goal is to educate new dorm residents on fire hazards.

"The malicious pulling of the fire alarm is a recurrent activity among new residents," said Bellows. "We are required to evacuate the building no matter what the alarm occurs. This is a criminal offense and depending on the nature of the crime the criminal may be fined in civil court or expelled from school. We will not put up with it."

This summer the fire department will install smoke detectors in the dorms which will be monitored from the emergency command center. There is also a complete sensor and alarm system in the library which has a full sprinkler system and is monitored 24 hours a day.

Lew Schmutz, battalion chief and training officer of the San Luis Obispo Fire Department, said the hot weather brings on carelessness. There is less humidity so things are easier to ignite and subsequently burn. The winds intensify this effect even more, causing the county to be a prime fire-breeding area.

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From page 4

Sign reflects the benevolent feelings San Luis Obispo has toward the firefighters from all over the state who helped to save the city.