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Big Sur chief says the next fire could be worse

Town hall meetings set with Potter, Farr

By CHRIS COUNTS

ALMOST 400 square miles were burned, but in the wake of the colossal Basin Complex and Indian fires — and with the lives of many Big Sur residents returning to normal — a group of local officials, firefighters and residents are already planning for the next fire.

Fifth District Supervisor Dave Potter and U.S. Rep. Sam Farr will co-chair the first of two special Big Sur Multi-Agency Advisory Council meetings Monday, Aug. 4, at the Pfeiffer Big Sur Lodge Conference Center. A second meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, Aug. 12.

The first meeting will focus on what worked, what didn't work and "what we need to improve," according to organizers.

Frank Pinney is one of those think-

ing about the next fire. The chief of the Big Sur Volunteer Fire Brigade, he met last week with a fire ecology consultant who is experienced in preparing community fire plans. He is also talking to the Big Sur Land Trust about a grant proposal that could help fund the development of such a plan.

After the recent fires scorched more than 250,000 acres, and with most vegetation gone over an estimated 90 percent of the Ventana Wilderness, there is little left in the Big Sur backcountry to burn. But the two most populated parts of the coast — the Palo Colorado area and residential neighborhoods located west of Highway 1 — were completely untouched by the blaze. For residents who live up dirt roads surrounded by dry brush, the threat of another devastating wildfire in the near future is still very real. And the next fire could burn many more homes.

"We've had a full scale dress

See FIRE page 13A

Steelhead population sets record

By KELLY NIX

THE POPULATION of steelhead trout in the Carmel River this summer is the highest it's been in nearly two decades, leaving local wildlife experts baffled.



PHOTO/COURTESY MPWMD

Using nets and quick arms, rescue workers in Carmel Valley have captured a record number of steelhead trout.

Since May 14, a record 56,000 steelhead have been rescued from the river, according to Kevan Urquhart, senior fisheries biologist for the Monterey Peninsula Water Management District.

"We really don't know why it's happening," Urquhart said. "I'm scratching my head."

Young steelhead trout in the Carmel River — listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a threatened even though they are one of the world's most plentiful fish species — are counted by MPWMD workers and volunteers from the Carmel River Steelhead Association as they rescue them from the receding river each summer. The rescues began in 1989.

By the end of August, rescuers expect to save as many as 80,000 steelhead, compared to a previous record of just under 40,000 in 2003, Urquhart said.

While 800 fish rescued per day is considered good in average years, Urquhart the number of fish rescued this season is beyond anybody's expectations. "We are rescuing 2,000 fish a day," he said.

The water level in the Carmel River — the Monterey Peninsula's main water source — becomes low particularly in the summer because there is no rain, while pumping for human use is at its peak.

And, although heavy winter rains can significantly benefit the steelhead population in the summer, the fish have miraculously thrived despite last

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EROSION MAJOR THREAT IN BLAZE'S AFTERMATH

By CHRIS COUNTS

WITH VAST stretches of mountainous terrain in the Carmel River watershed now devoid of vegetation, officials with California American Water Co. are worried that debris from the fire could reduce the storage capacity of an already shrinking Los

Padres Dam reservoir, making it harder to keep the Carmel River running during the summer.

The situation puts the water company in the ironic position of hoping for no major downpours this winter.

"We're praying for light rains," said

See EROSION page 9A

Parolee flees, is nabbed after cellphone stop

By MARY BROWNFIELD

PACIFIC GROVE police chased down and arrested a parolee wanted on a \$1 million warrant last week after a sergeant stopped him on Jewell Avenue for talking on his cell phone while driving, according to Cmdr. John Nyunt.

Just after 5 p.m. July 24, Cpl. Roxane Viray reportedly spotted Pacific Grove resident Robert Odonnell, 42, holding a cell phone to his ear as he drove down the street — which became illegal July 1.

He provided Viray with a temporary driver's license, but when she walked back to her patrol car to see if he was wanted on any warrants, he got out of his car, saying something about having to pick up his kids, according to Nyunt.

"And he basically ran away," he said.

In the meantime, Viray learned from the records check that the suspect was a parolee at large wanted for larceny on a \$1 million warrant out



Robert Odonnell

See PAROLEE page 7A



MAP BY THE CARMEL PINE CONE

Two Big Sur wildfires spared restaurants, resorts and most homes, but burned a vast mountainous area, including critical watersheds, making erosion next winter a major threat.

Tomato fanatic bids adieu to the fest, but not the fruit

By MARY BROWNFIELD

THE MAN who transformed a backyard potluck into the nation's premier homage to the tomato is retiring.

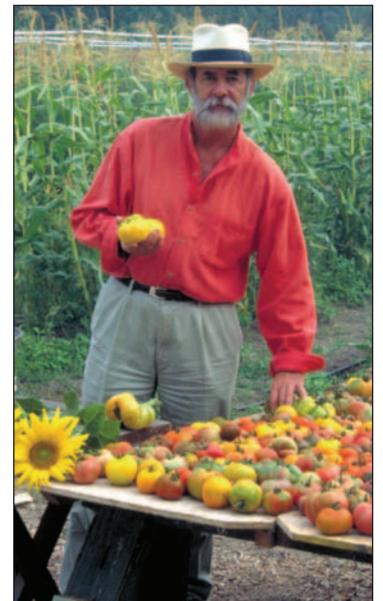
Gary Ibsen, whose expansive enthusiasm and organizational skills helped popularize heirloom tomatoes and the festival he devoted to them, said the Sept. 14 Carmel TomatoFest will be his last.

"My health has had some challenges I have to pay attention to, and they demand I step back from the 10 months it takes me to plan the TomatoFest each year," Ibsen said last week.

He declined to provide details about his condition, but said he began contemplating retirement from the festival, which he has run for 17 years, after his most recent visit to the hospital in April.

"I made a promise to my family I would focus more on them," he said. Also, the TomatoFest, sponsored by NatureSweet, has achieved much of what he envisioned.

"It's provided what I wanted to provide ... bringing people from outside the community into the community." Last year's event drew participants from 36 states and six countries, accord-



Gary Ibsen with some of his babies.

See TOMATOES page 11A