

# SANTA MARIA TIMES

## 'Foster Express Challenge'

Program aims to put pets in homes for holidays.

CENTRAL COAST, A3



## Rivera, Padilla named Athletes of the Week

St. Joseph, Santa Ynez hoop stars honored at Round Table. SPORTS, B1

TURNING CLOUDY 66 • 44 FORECAST, B10 | TUESDAY, DECEMBER 17, 2019 | santamariatimes.com

### WILDFIRE COUNTY | PREPARING FOR THE NEXT BIG BLAZE



LEN WOOD, STAFF

Tepusquet Canyon resident Renée O'Neill and husband Steve, not pictured, have prepared for wildfires by installing their own firefighting water system...

# Escaping destruction

Residents of high-risk Tepusquet Canyon have been lucky — so far

MIKE HODGSON

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Steve and Renée O'Neill consider their 70-acre ranch near the top of Tepusquet Canyon one of the most beautiful properties in Santa Barbara County.

Thick chaparral, oak trees, wild grasses and riparian habitat have made the canyon a popular destination for those drawn by rural living...

Taking their dirt access road one way leads across a wooden bridge into a meadow surrounded by oaks at the foot of a hill where lightning once ignited a wildfire...

To the right past the gate stands a one-bedroom cabin that various Santa Barbara County Fire Department personnel have rented over the years...

Tepusquet Road.

But across the road is a wall of oak trees and thick chaparral that has landed the canyon on the county's map of serious wildfire risk areas.

It's one reason the O'Neills have attached sprinklers along the ridges of their home, the shed and the cabin.

They've also installed three fire hydrants on their property. A red box beside each one holds a long fire hose and nozzle for firefighters' use.

The O'Neills also have a 500-gallon water trailer and a 1975 Mack fire engine Renée's husband, Steve, bought from Hancock College and put back into running condition.

When fire crews ask O'Neill if the fire engine works, she says, "Yup, it still squirts water." They laugh and say, "You mean it still pumps water?"

Please see TEPUSQUET, Page A10

### FROM THE EDITOR

## Looking back to prepare for the future in 'Wildfire County'

Large, destructive and deadly wildfires have become the "new normal" for California, according to the state Fire Foundation...

Santa Barbara County has an average of 100 wildfires per year. While almost 96% of them are contained at less than 10 acres, the exceptions are record-setting.

The 2007 Zaca fire at just over 240,000 acres is still among the state's 20 largest wildfires since 1932, along with the Thomas fire that burned into Santa Barbara County from Ventura at almost 282,000 acres.

State and federal officials have listed every city, town, village and cluster of homes in the county as "at risk" of wildfire,



even places like Santa Maria and Guadalupe, which are surrounded by thousands of acres of farmland.

Fire officials attribute the county's high risk, in part, to its location in the wildfire "Goldilocks zone," where conditions are "just right" to grow fuels, then cook them tinder-dry.

The county's mix of topography, abundant fuels and Sun-downer winds presents a specific set of challenges for firefighters who say they'd rather fight wildfires almost anywhere than the place some of them have dubbed Wildfire County.

## Courtroom modification prompts challenge

MS-13 defendant says limited seating threatens fair trial

DAVE MINSKY dminsky@leecentralcoastnews.com

One of the defendants indicted in the Operation Matador case has filed a motion arguing that a proposed modification to the courtroom, which will remove most of the public seating, will violate his constitutional right to a fair trial.

In the motion filed in Superior Court on Nov. 12, Stephen Dunkle, the attorney for Marcos Manuel Sanchez Torres, wrote that removing most of the courtroom's seating could violate his client's Sixth and Fourteenth Amendment rights...



Torres

Torres is one of 15 arrested during Operation Matador in March 2016. Among those, he is one of a group of 10 facing a multitude of gang-related charges, including murder.

Investigators believe that Torres and the other nine defendants are members of the transnational

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## Dems make case for Trump impeachment

LISA MASCARO AND MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Democrats laid out their impeachment case against President Donald Trump on Monday, a sweeping report accusing him of betraying the nation and deserving to be ousted...

What Democrats once hoped would be a bipartisan act — only the third time in U.S. history the House will be voting to impeach a president — is now on track to be a starkly partisan roll call Wednesday.

A raucous town hall Monday in the Detroit suburbs put on display the nation's wrenching debate over the unconventional president and the prospect of removing him from office.

"There's certainly a lot of controversy about this," Slotkin acknowledged to the crowd of 400. "But there just has to be a moment where you use the letter of the law for what it's intended."

Please see IMPEACHMENT, Page A2

## Cave fire offers textbook example

Dry vegetation, high winds equaled explosive spread

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The Cave fire that erupted Nov. 25 was a textbook example of various Santa Barbara County wildfires, encompassing virtually all the elements that, in one combination or another, have characterized the South Coast's most significant blazes.

The elements: late-season ignition, point of origin near roads atop the mountain range, extended dry spell, high temperatures, low humidity, powerful Santa Lucia winds, thick vegetation, explosive spread, hundreds of homes threatened, thousands evacuated, steep and rugged terrain, bulldozers ineffective, heroic hand-crew efforts, heavy



MIKE ELIASON, SANTA BARBARA COUNTY FIRE

Embers fly from the Cave fire off Highway 154, three miles north of Santa Barbara, on Nov. 25.

aerial assault, strong mutual-aid response, shrewd firefighting tactics.

However, while its ignition and spread followed a classic South Coast wildfire pattern, the Cave fire did not end in typical fashion. Coming late in the fire season,

after 180 days with no precipitation and weeks of above-normal temperatures, the Cave fire ignited in Los Padres National Forest amid vegetation thick from last winter's rains yet critically

Please see CAVE FIRE, Page A8

### About this series

Over the course of four days, we look back at tales of evacuation, Tepusquet residents who watched the Alamo fire blacken their canyon home as they fled down narrow access roads; Mission Hills residents who escaped following orders delivered by a first responder with a bullhorn; and campers who, trapped by a wall of flame, were saved by a firefighter leading a convoy on a bulldozer.

We also look forward at how conditions are changing, agencies are preparing and, ultimately, how we can apply lessons learned from those who have witnessed — and survived — a big blaze.

Coming Wednesday: Fueling the blaze



News+ offers exclusive digital content for our members, such as the "Sunday Extra," a weekly special edition.

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