

Seeking safety on Hwy 154

Citizens look for answers to crashes. **CENTRAL COAST, A3**

Clash on the court

Righetti Warriors host Nipomo Titans in girls hoops showdown. **SPORTS, B1**



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WILDFIRE COUNTY | PREPARING FOR THE NEXT BIG BLAZE



LEN WOOD, STAFF

Heather and Eric Schiff moved from Mission Hills after the 2017 Rucker fire, in part because of concerns about evacuating their daughter, EmmaRose, who has special needs.

‘Pretty much the worst’

Mission Hills residents open up about dangerously close Rucker fire

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As Heather Schiff thinks back to navigating her vehicle to her Mission Hills home from her job at Vandenberg Air Force Base on the afternoon of Sept. 29, 2017, she recalls the normally routine drive being anything but.

“It was the worst drive of my life,” she said matter-of-factly, recalling the thoughts that swirled through her head on a day that was burned into the memories of both her and her husband, Eric.

Shortly before getting in her car, Heather received word from Eric that a fire had flared up near their small community just north of Lompoc.

After a quick online search, Heather realized there were actually a few fires that had been reported around the Mission Hills area and that residents were being asked to evacuate as soon



WILLIS JACOBSON, STAFF

Flames approach the Mission Hills area of Lompoc in the early stages of the Rucker fire in September 2017.



as possible.

Heather's thoughts immediately turned to Eric and their 8-year-old daughter Emma-

Rose, who has special needs, including immobility.

“[The road] was blocked off, I couldn't get home and it just looked like our entire house was on fire from what I could see,” Heather said.

Please see **RUCKER**, 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 Saturday:
Blocking the blaze

Please see **BUDGET**, Page A7

House nears impeachment as Trump decries ‘vicious crusade’

LISA MASCARO AND MARY CLARE JALONICK
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — On the eve of almost-certain impeachment, President Donald Trump fired off a furious letter Tuesday to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi denouncing the “vicious crusade” against him, while Democrats amassed the votes they needed and Republicans looked ahead, vowing to defend Trump at next month's Senate trial.

Trump, who would be just the third U.S. president to be impeached, acknowledged he was powerless to stop Wednesday's vote. He appeared to intend his lengthy, accusatory message less for Pelosi than for the broad audience of citizens — including 2020 voters — watching history unfolding on Capitol Hill.

He accused the Democrats of acting out of “Trump Derangement Syndrome,” still smarting from their 2016 election losses. “You are the ones bringing pain and suffering to our Republic for your own selfish, personal political and partisan gain.”

Please see **IMPEACHMENT**, Page A7

Dried-out chaparral provides tinderbox conditions

Volatility increases with age, heightening wildfire danger

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Chaparral is the fuel that makes Santa Barbara County wildfires so dangerous and difficult to control.

It most areas of the county, it makes up one arm of wildfire's triangle of ingredients — fuels, weather and topography.

Its mix of woody brush and shrubs of chamise, ceanothus and manzanita are found every-

where — blanketing the Santa Ynez, Sierra Madre and San Rafael mountains, covering the Casmalia, Soloman, Purisima and Santa Rosa hills and overlaying large swaths of the Lompoc Valley and Tranquillon Peak areas of Vandenberg Air Force Base.

Firefighters say its volatility increases with age, heightening the danger in places like Tepusquet Canyon, which hasn't seen a sweeping wildfire in 65 years.

“Chaparral fuel is relatively nonflammable the first 20 years,”

Please see **CHAPARRAL**, Page A9



LEN WOOD, STAFF

Homes near the Country Club area of Vandenberg Village, north of Lompoc, are surrounded by Burton Mesa chaparral, as seen in a recent photo.



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