

Suspicious fire burns likely transient camp

July 27, 2019



Firefighters spent some two hours July 22 putting down a fire burning in a woody area north of Elk Valley Road, a location sometimes referred to as the Ruth Compound or “the swamps.”

The area is outside of the Crescent City limits, where transient campsites often are found, said officials.

At about 6 p.m., Crescent City Fire and Rescue (CCRF) crews responded with two fire engines, a water tender and a command vehicle, joined by an engine crew from Cal Fire.

Access to the woods behind Elk Valley Road is constricted, forcing firefighters to enter using a path that extends from Michigan Avenue. Fire engines went farther east, pushing down a rough road from Union Street.

The fire appeared to have completely burned two vehicles, a travel trailer, a refrigerator and piles of scattered rubbish.

The flames also climbed 40 to 50 feet up into a pair of spruce trees above the makeshift campsite.

CCRF Interim Fire Chief Bill Gillespie said the fire was determined to be suspicious, although the investigation would not rule out an accidental cause such as electrical short-circuit or a candle falling over.

He said the site appeared to have been some sort of transient camp.

And there was evidence of several prior fires in the area, most of them found to be suspicious.

“We saw a couple of bystanders,” Gillespie said. “They weren’t real forthright, as to if anybody was currently living there or what the situation was.”

Without more evidence or witnesses, Gillespie said, it would be difficult to provide more details about how the fire started.

Typically, fire officials try to determine the fire's point of origin, which could potentially reveal what caused it. In this case, the fire inflicted enough damage to leave it unclear where or how it started — indicating only that the biggest body of fire was around the travel trailer.

Gillespie urged the public to alert emergency responders if they see smoke or suspect a fire is burning where it shouldn't be. He mentioned recently responding to what was likely an unattended campfire that grew into a 15-foot-by-40-foot blaze in the early morning hours on the beach by Anchor Way.

Del Norte County Sheriff's Office deputies responded to the fire scene as well. Law enforcement officials said they'll try to identify who had been at the scene, hopefully finding leads through license plates or discarded property.

However, the chaotic nature of a transient camp could make tracing those leads a challenge, they said.

The fire was documented by the Sheriff's Office, but there is no active investigation.

Sheriff's Office Commander Bill Steven said people with old camping trailers and tents are consistently found in the area where the fire occurred, and that fires occur there frequently.

The concealed, woody area also has a decades-long history of drug use and other criminal activity, said officials.

A recent Triplicate report put the issue of homelessness into local light. In that report, Steven noted that nearly any local area that offers the concealment of trees and thickets probably has, or had, homeless camps hidden within, which often means fires for cooking and warmth.

"They'll get these burns going, and they'll burn wood and brush and trash," Steven said.

K-9 Officer Gene Votruba of the Crescent City Police Department said in that same Triplicate report that the so-called Ruth Compound or "swamps" could be potentially dangerous to law enforcement, which may attract certain individuals.

"It's quite the scene out there," Votruba said.