

La Conchita keeps eye on impending storms

Zeke Barlow, Ventura County Star, 12-22-10

It's not the rain that makes Dona Gann worry, it's the thunder.

Because thunder triggers the memory of that particularly violent 2005 rainstorm when, with a loud crack that rang through her La Conchita neighborhood, the earth gave way and a river of mud and rocks forever changed her community. Ten people were killed and 16 homes destroyed in the Jan. 10, 2005, landslide that followed a deluge of rain that comes once every 200 years, experts say.

"When I hear thunder, I freak out," she said as she stood Tuesday in front of her home, which faces the tongue of the slide that still sits in the small coastal community north of Ventura.

Like most of her neighbors, Gann and her husband have taken this week's nonstop rain in stride, keeping a watchful eye on weather forecasts and the gash in the hillside that looms above them, but going about their life as usual.

Many were keeping tabs on the big storm predicted to hit late Tuesday or early today, hoping the worst of the storm will hit farther south.

"So far, we have been very fortunate in not being hit by the really heavy stuff," said Mike Bell, spokesman for the La Conchita Community Organization. "What wakes me up at 2 a.m. is the pounding rain."

As of Tuesday afternoon, La Conchita had avoided the type of heavy storm that battered the community in 2005, when more than 8 inches of rain fell at the Ventura County Watershed Protection District's rain gauge at Sea Cliff, just south of La Conchita. Since Friday, less than 4 inches have fallen there.

Mark Bandurraga, an engineer with the district, said the amount of rain that hit the county in 2005 in such a short time happens once every 200 or so years. But he, like others, were waiting to see what would happen Tuesday night.

Gann's husband, Ray, said he thinks the new owner of the orchard above the community has done a lot to divert water from the landslide area, making it much safer. A 2008 jury found the La Conchita Ranch Co. was negligent in connection with the slide. The lawsuit accused the ranch company of not building an adequate drainage system. A settlement awarded the victims' families \$5 million and ownership of the ranch.

Still, Ray Gann and others are keeping an eye on the hillside, looking for any telltale signs of problems such as mud running down the street. As of Tuesday, there weren't any problems.

"If it gets bad, we'll just take off," Ray Gann said. His wife has left their home during four different rain storms since 2005, staying with family or in a motel.

Nicholas Cotsis, 88, lived through the battle at Normandy in World War II and the 2005 slide, so he's not too worried about another.

"Everyone asks me, 'Are you afraid?' and I tell them, 'I'm 88 years old, I'm on bonus time,'" he said as he laughed and looked at the slide.

For outsiders who wonder about living in La Conchita, the locals always have an easy answer as to why they stay — the community of people. The small group of eclectic neighbors loves having ocean views that are still affordable; the neighbors all know and care for each other and stick together, through good times and bad.

“This is what Santa Barbara used to be like,” said Jonathan Pursel, who just rented a home four houses from the edge of the mudslide. He talked to people in the neighborhood about the hazards and checked out the geology reports before moving in and says he feels safe, rain and all.

But like everyone else there, he can't help but look at the hill when it's raining, just to make sure.