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Two research labs gutted in Sinsheimer blaze

By [Jim Burns](#)

A three-alarm fire Friday on the fourth floor of Sinsheimer Laboratories injured no one but gutted two large research labs, damaged other areas of the building, and closed several other buildings in the Science Hill area of campus.

UCSC Fire Department crews, responding to a call triggered by the building's heat detection system, arrived on the scene at approximately 5:30 in the morning.

By the time the fire was controlled shortly before noon, crews from the City of Santa Cruz, City of Scotts Valley, Aptos, and the Central Fire Department in Capitola-Soquel had joined the UCSC crews to battle the blaze.

At one point, as many as 65 firefighters and 15 engines were on the scene.



UCSC fire crews, as well

as personnel from the campus's Environmental, Health, and Safety Office, characterized the research labs of biologists Manuel Ares and Jane Silverthorne as total losses.

The cause of the fire is being investigated by the California Department of Forestry and the State Fire Marshal's Office. It will be several days at least before a cause is determined and a full assessment of the damages made.

Ares, who watched from outside the building, expressed grave concern about the impact the lost research would have on his ten-person research team, especially the group's four graduate and four undergraduate students.

"We have good morale, and we'll pull through," he said. Ares, chair of the Department of Molecular, Cell, and Developmental Biology, and his team study how genes are expressed in cells and how gene functions change in diseased cells, such as cancer cells. In the process, they compare how genes act differently in healthy and diseased



cells, which can lead to new ideas about curing disease.

Ares also expressed concern that the damage would extend to the labs and equipment of his fellow researchers in Sinsheimer. Several, he added, had already offered him space in their labs.

The fire Friday began in the southwest corner of Sinsheimer Laboratories and later flames billowed out of two other windows, top and center photos. Firemen were hosed down with soap and water after leaving the building, in case they had been exposed to hazardous materials. They then had to put their firefighting gear in a bag and don white jumpsuits until their clothing could be checked. Police sealed off a large area around the fire. Photos: Louise Donahue

Silverthorne, associate professor of molecular, cell, and developmental biology, is currently on leave and was unavailable for comment on Friday. Her research focuses on the molecular biology of plant development.

By noon on Friday, Natural Sciences Dean David Kliger and Chancellor Greenwood had convened a meeting of the building's principal investigators (PI) to determine how best to preserve other research activities in the building. Researchers from other parts of the building had reason to be concerned, as smoke and water may have damaged other labs and offices. Compounding the problem, electricity remained out throughout the building for much of Friday, placing in jeopardy valuable research materials that are stored in freezers.

As the meeting of PIs was taking place, EH&S personnel--working with a hazardous materials team from Scotts Valley--assessed the damage, inventoried materials, conducted tests to determine air quality, and also found time to rescue some of the threatened research projects.

Earlier in the day, occupants of nearby Kerr Hall, Thimann Laboratories, and Thimann Lecture Hall were either prevented from entering the area or evacuated as a precaution. The Science and Engineering Library was closed by mid-morning because the electricity that powers the building had been interrupted by outages at Sinsheimer; University Librarian Allan Dyson reported that the power had returned by 3 p.m., and a skeleton staff reopened the library. The Core West Parking Structure was also closed on Friday.

Classes, of course, were not held in the buildings that were closed, though some of the affected classes did take place in other locations.

It is expected that all classes will resume on Monday. For the latest

information, members of the UCSC community are advised to call the campus's emergency information line, 459-INFO.

Tim Stephens and Elizabeth Irwin contributed to this report.

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