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New Mexico fire incinerates town

By Chris Roberts
Associated Press

LOS ALAMOS, N.M. — Driven by swirling winds of up to 45 mph, fire rolled from block to block in abandoned Los Alamos on Thursday, burning scores of homes down to their foundations in the town where the atomic bomb was built.

Firefighters rushed to save houses as orange flames and billowing smoke rose over the town. Whole neighborhoods were reduced to smoking ruins, with everything from trailers to mansions going up in smoke.

The wildfire first reached Los Alamos on Wednesday — forcing the evacuation of the entire town — and exploded in size from 3,700 acres to 18,000 Thursday, fanned by blowtorch wind so strong it made parked cars sway.

"I can't believe how many homes are gone," said Don Shainin, a fire battalion commander from Albuquerque who came to Los Alamos to help out.

At the Los Alamos nuclear weapons laboratory, flames singed a research building, rolled past concrete bunkers containing explosives, and came within 30 yards of a plutonium storage facility. But lab officials insisted that dangerous materials were protected in fire-proof facilities strong enough to withstand the crash of a 747.

"We can assure the country and New Mexico that our nuclear materials are safe," said Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, a former New Mexico congressman.

County Manager Joe King esti-

mated that 100 homes burned. Rep. Tom Udall, whose district includes Los Alamos, said federal officials estimated 300 to 400.

With the fire spreading and 18,000 people evacuated from Los Alamos and nearby White Rock, finger-pointing had already begun.

The fire had been set May 4 by the National Park Service to clear brush near Bandelier National Monument, but it raged out of control in the dry, windy conditions. Bandelier's superintendent said he didn't see a special National Weather Service forecast faxed to the park beforehand that said fire-growth conditions were at their highest.

Federal authorities pledged to investigate.

"Somebody made a mistake and obviously we have to find out who," Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., said as he visited the fire zone.

Crews working with hand tools and bulldozers worked feverishly to protect homes by clearing away vegetation and cutting firebreaks ahead of the flames. Helicopters dropped water on the fire, while airplanes bombarded it with pink fire retardant.

Los Alamos, 70 miles north of Albuquerque, is essentially a company town for the weapons laboratory, which employs 7,000 people at buildings scattered throughout the city. The town is on a mesa at an altitude of 7,600 feet.

The fire came out of the Jemez Mountains to the west and moved northeast, torching the west and north sides of the city.

Past Humane Society official denies claims

EUGENE — The former director of Humane Society chapters in Bend and in Eugene denies allegations that he mismanaged finances or kept pornographic files on an office computer.

"Absolutely not," Kimball Lewis told The Register-Guard.

Lewis resigned last month as director of the Humane Society of Central Oregon in Bend after employees demanded that the board of directors fire him.

The Oregon attorney general's office is investigating allegations of financial mismanagement at the Bend chapter, and similar allegations have surfaced at the Greenhill Humane Society in Eugene.

Gov. John Kitzhaber's office is looking into whether Lewis had a state humane agent license, which allows humane society employees to serve search warrants and make arrests in animal cruelty cases.

The eight valid licenses in Oregon were issued to other agents, but Lewis had one that appears to bear the governor's signature.

Lewis blamed his resignation from the Bend chapter of the Humane Society on the death of his German shepherd, Donner, after the dog was found shot and hanged in a tree outside his home.

Lewis left the Eugene chapter of the Humane Society last summer to take over as executive director in Bend.

He said the allegations at both chapters may be the result of his management style.

"I didn't come to Eugene to

make as many friends as I could," he told The Register-Guard. "I came to Eugene to stop as much animal abuse as I could."

The Humane Society employees in Bend alleged that Lewis mismanaged the shelter's money, was addicted to computer pornography and showed disrespect for women.

Two weeks ago, former Greenhill employees Amy Vogt and Misty Green alleged that similar problems occurred at the Eugene chapter, saying Lewis received unrecorded donations. Green also said she regularly came across pornographic materials on a computer she shared with Lewis.

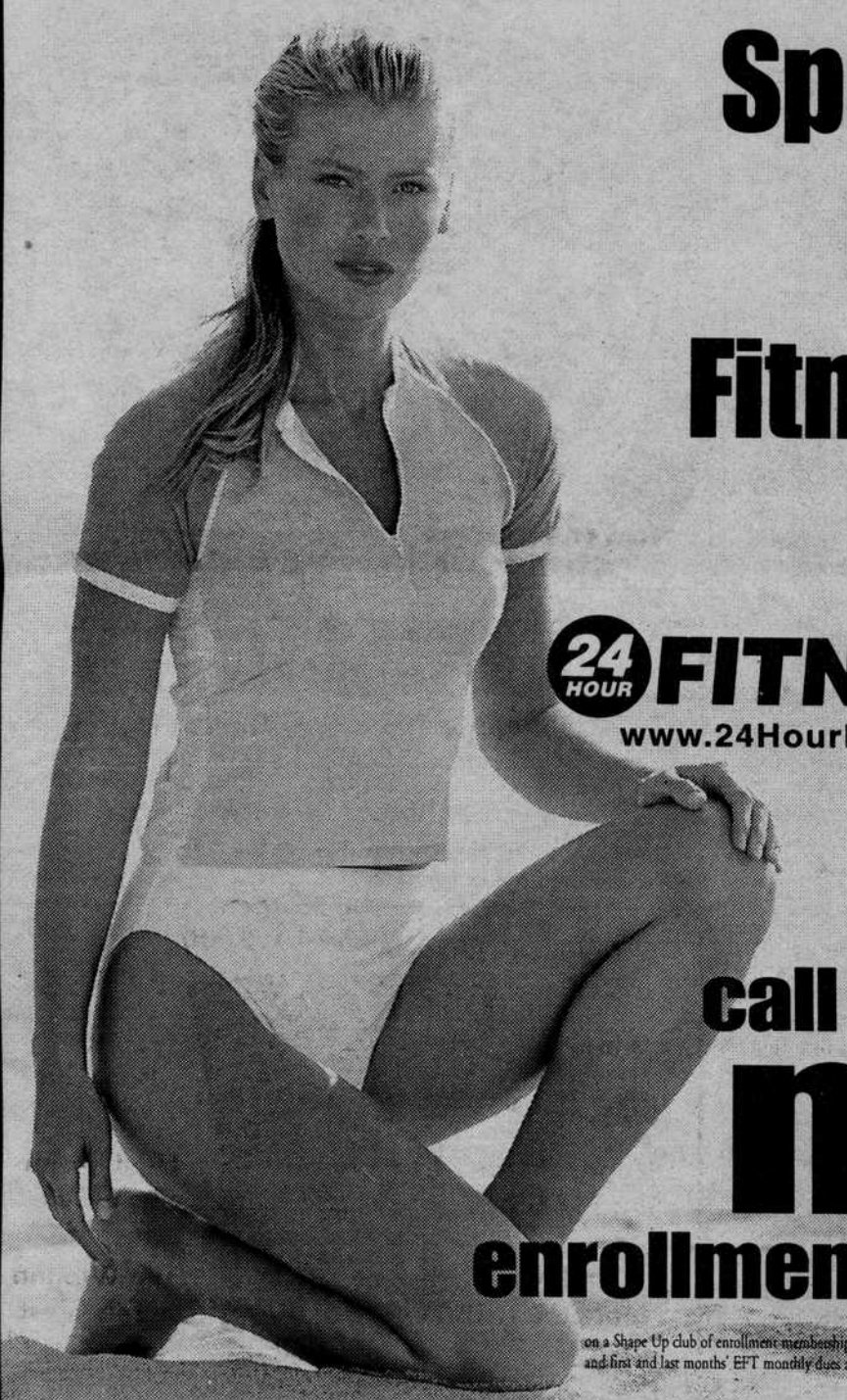
A third former employee, Shelly Timmins, has since stepped forward and said that she, too, questioned Lewis about some of his financial procedures and priorities at Greenhill. Timmins said she was in charge of day-to-day bookkeeping at Greenhill for 15 months until Lewis fired her in April 1998.

Executive Director Laura Brounsten and board President Susan Hilton have said they have no evidence of impropriety and support Lewis as a dedicated leader in the fight for stray and abused animals.

"People who monitor the organization have stated that I did an excellent job," Lewis said.

He said he didn't respond to the Greenhill accusations earlier because he was grief-stricken over the death of his dog. "But remaining silent now doesn't help me any more," he said.

The Associated Press



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