Texas tortoise theft leads to arrest of suspected sex offender

By Jon Herskovitz

AUSTIN — Police investigating a Texas man for holding a tortoise for ransom ordered him to turn over a flap of skin from a child, officials said on Thursday.

When police went to the home of Joseph Urbano, 34, in the search for tortoise, they learned in a background check that he had outstanding warrants in a child sexual assault case and arrested him.

“He is definitely unique,” said Investigator Philip Lohr of the Brazoria County Sheriff’s Office. “We got someone off of the street for sexual assault, murder of a child over the theft of a tortoise.”

The deputation who arrested Urbano also found the missing African spurred tortoise, stuffed into a duffel bag at Urbano’s home.

The owner of the 5-year-old tortoise, Stacey Soriano-Krampertz, told local broadcaster KPRC that Grace went missing about three weeks ago when she was moving from her home about 30 miles south of Houston.

The African spurred tortoise is a large species of tortoise that can grow to about 18 to 20 inches.

Soriano-Krampertz posted an apology seeking the tortoise’s return and received a call from a man saying he would give it back for $10,000.

After being told by neighbors that Urbano had the tortoise, she filed with the Brazoria County Sheriff’s Office, which went to deputies to investigate.

Crews make progress against blaze

By Curtis Skinner

SAN FRANCISCO — Firefighters kept battling blazes across drought-parched California on Thursday and thousands of them made solid progress against a wildfire that has forced 150 people to evacuate homes outside of San Francisco.

Firefighters had drawn containment lines around about 33 percent of the so-called Jerusalem Fire, which grew overnight to cover 23,500 acres (95.5 hectares) by Thursday morning, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire).

The inferno, which is charring ranch land north of Napa Valley wine country some 150 miles outside of San Francisco, has displaced about 150 people and threatens at least 50 more homes and ranches, Cal fire said.

Cal Fire spokesman Steve Spinell said most of the fire’s growth has been to the north, away from communities near Lake Berryessa. He said fire breaks in the area, installed by crews over the last several years, have served as a cushion against the blaze.

“We have worked furiously to put containment lines around there to keep those communities safe,” Spinell said. Firefighters have also been able to contain 95 percent of a behemoth 64,440-acre fire burning north of the north. The so-called Rocky Fire, California’s hottest wildfire so far this season, destroyed 43 homes along with dozens of outbuildings and caused hundreds to lose their homes.

Spinell said cooler temperatures should help fighting efforts in the region through Thursday, though winds could stoke fire activity.

Experts have predicted an unusually active and destructive wildfire season in California as the state grapples with a fourth year of crippling drought. The California fires were among dozens of blazes burning elsewhere across the U.S. West.

The Wildfire Fire in the northern Cascades mountains of Washington state has grown to cover 37,060 acres (14,977 hectares) and could grow further on Thursday amid dry and hot conditions, according to the InciWeb fire information center.

That blaze forced about 360 people to evacuate from a camping area in the year round Luthers retreat of Holden Village, fire officials said.

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Man dies from brain-eating amoeba infection

By Heide Bransdorfer

OKLAHOMA CITY — An Oklahoma man has died after contracting a rare brain-eating disease while swimming in a lake in the southern part of the state, officials said on Thursday.

The man, whose name has not been released, was hospitalized last week in Oklahoma City after a visit to Lake Murray, about 15 miles south of Oklahoma City, health officials said. He died on Wednesday.

The disease is caused by exposure to a single-celled organism known as Naegleria fowleri, commonly referred to as the brain-eating amoeba. It is commonly found in warm freshwater such as lakes, rivers and hot springs, as well as soil.

It usually infects people when contaminated water enters the body through the nose, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Contracting the brain disease is rare, it said.

The organism is most commonly encountered in the southwestern United States during the summer, when temperatures are highest.

The CDC said 53 U.S. people known to have been infected with it in the United States since 1962, only three have survived, the CDC said.