

San Quentin: Inside California's death row

By Howard Mintz, San Jose Mercury News

SAN QUENTIN – A dozen years ago, state prison officials opened up this infamous death row for a tour to demonstrate the crumbling, overcrowded cells housing the 600 killers then awaiting execution.

Puddles of water sat on the cold, dank floors, as California leaders worried that the nation's largest death row would run out of space.

Prison officials unlocked death row for media inspection once again in December – and it seemed time had stopped.

There are now 745 condemned killers, with no realistic projection for when San Quentin's lethal injection chamber might reopen for business.

Joseph Michael Nissensohn, sentenced to die two years ago for the murder of two Monterey County teen girls and a Lake Tahoe girl, captures the irony of California's death row. Even if the state resumes executions, Nissensohn, beginning a 25- to 30-year trip through the appeals process at 64 years old, knows he's unlikely to die by lethal injection.

"By the time they get to me, I'll be long gone," he said through his cell bars.

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