

CHRISTOPHER CHUNG / The Press Democrat

Property owner Connie Cook examines the kitchen of her rental unit, near Graton, recently vacated by Gwen Smith. Smith had refused to pay rent for more than a year while living at the property, and Cook said she left the unit uncleaned and damaged.

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Less than an hour before her eviction hearing was to start in a Sonoma County courtroom, Gwen Smith finished packing her old pickup and drove away from her rented apartment, finally leaving the rural west county property owned by beleaguered homeowner Connie Cook.

Cook, 66, said Wednesday she is relieved to finally have the woman off her property after 18 months. But her hopes of getting more than a year of back rent remain a longshot even as she works to ease herself away from the edge of foreclosure.

Walking through the vacated apartment this week — her first look inside the rental in more than a year — Cook saw the holes in walls, the ruined carpet, the accumulated bathroom filth and then reflected on the landlord-tenant battle she calls the worst experience of her life.

“It’s amazing she could live like this,” said Cook, who fluctuated between disgust and tears during a tour of the apartment Wednesday morning.

Smith’s court record as a tenant in Sonoma County and out of state became public during the spring, when she lost a lengthy legal battle

with a previous Sebastopol landlord.

In that case, Superior Court Judge Elliot Daum concluded Smith had moved into Barbara Wilt's converted garage and maliciously and manipulatively stopped paying her rent. In April he ordered Smith to pay Wilt \$42,500 in back rent and damages.

Smith, 53, appealed Daum's decision and is awaiting a ruling. She has accused both her Sonoma County landlords, Cook and Wilt, of defamation and of offering substandard housing.

Smith, a paralegal who isn't licensed to practice law in California, fought eviction cases in Wisconsin and Arizona prior to the two California cases, according to court documents filed by Wilt's lawyer, Lisa Gyax of Santa Rosa.