



# THE Trumpet

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A publication from the Kansas Office of the State Fire Marshal | May 2014

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## SPRING WILDFIRES

INSIDE  
THIS  
ISSUE

## FROM THE STATE FIRE MARSHAL

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“It’s not if, but when the next wildfire will threaten your community.”

**THOUSANDS OF WILDFIRES BURN MILLIONS OF ACRES** every year across the United States. It’s not if, but when the next wildfire will threaten your community. No matter what your role, it’s important to know what specific actions you can take to reduce your risk to the next wildfire. Do your part to protect your community now.

The Ready, Set, Go! (RSG) Program, managed by the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), is just one of many excellent tools that help develop and improve the dialogue between emergency responders and the residents they serve. Find out more at [www.wildlandfirersg.org](http://www.wildlandfirersg.org)

**Ready – Be ready, be Firewise.** Take personal responsibility and prepare long before the threat of a wildland fire so your home is ready in case of a fire. Create defensible space by clearing brush away from your home. Use fire-resistant landscaping and harden your home with fire-safe construction measures. Assemble emergency supplies and belongings in a safe place. Plan escape routes and make sure all those residing within the home know the plan of action.

**Set – Situational awareness.** Pack your emergency items. Stay aware of the latest news and information on the fire from local media, your local fire department and public safety.

**Go – Act early!** Follow your personal wildland fire action plan. Doing so will not only support your safety, but will allow firefighters to best maneuver resources to combat the fire.

**Doug Jorgensen**  
Kansas State Fire Marshal

#### STAY CONNECTED





# HOT NEWS FROM THE OSFM

## NEW FACES



**CHRISTY CARTER**  
Inspector

Welcome to Christy Carter who joins us as the new inspector. Christy moved to Topeka from the Joplin area four years ago where she was an ICC Combination Building Inspector. In 2008, Christy earned the Chamber of Commerce Award for Excellence towards the citizens of the city, and in 2009 was awarded the Mayor's Commendation.

She happily resides with her husband, two step daughters, her Doberman, two cats and four fish.



**TRAVIS SUTTON**  
Enforcement Officer

Enforcement Officer Travis Sutton joined the OSFM in February after 13 years of service with the Mission Township Fire Department and Metropolitan Topeka Airport Authority Police and Fire Department.

Travis and his wife Michelle have a 13-year-old son and 19-year-old daughter. In his downtime, Travis enjoys home remodeling and spending time with his family and two dogs.



### OUR MISSION

The Office of the State Fire Marshal is dedicated to protecting the lives and property of the people of Kansas from the hazards of fire, explosion and hazardous materials by fostering a safe environment through education, inspection, enforcement, regulation, investigation, hazardous material incident mitigation, data collection, and by acting as a liaison to the Kansas Fire Service.

All of the efforts of the Office are designed to reduce the deaths, injuries and property losses of Kansans.

### CONTACT US

Office of the State Fire Marshal  
700 SW Jackson, Suite 600  
Topeka, KS 66603-3714  
785-296-3401



## THE TRUMPET

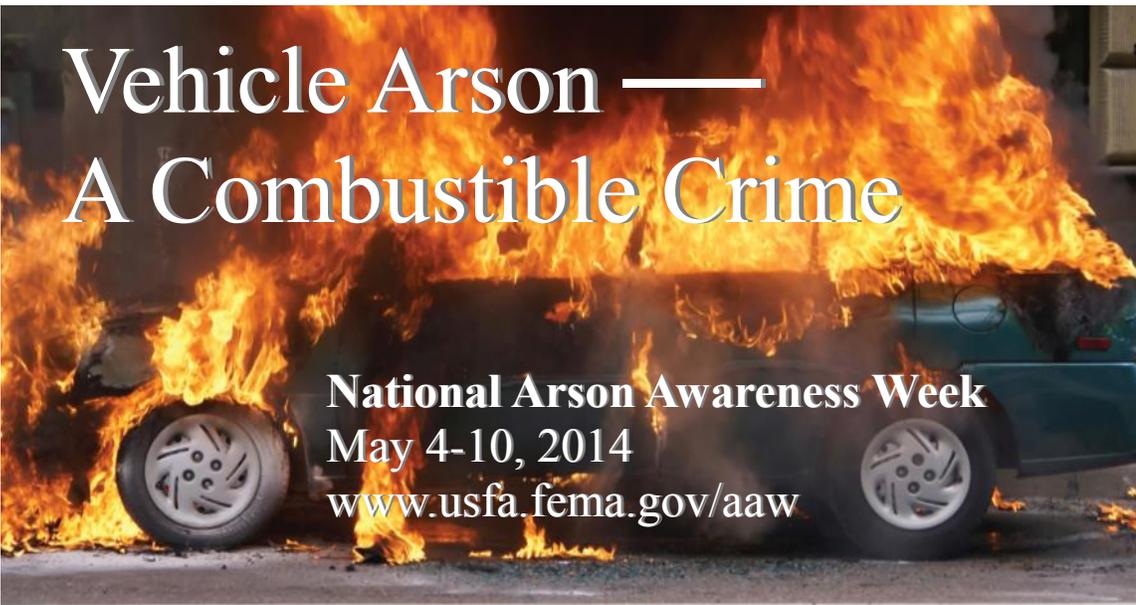


### EDITOR

Mai Hester  
Public Information Officer  
mai.hester@ksfm.ks.gov  
785-296-3403

### SUBMISSIONS

For information on receiving the State Fire Marshal Trumpet or to submit your meeting notices, training announcements, articles, photos, or other information, please contact [Mai Hester](mailto:mai.hester@ksfm.ks.gov). Photos should be submitted as a .jpg or .tif attachment to an email. All materials are due by the 20th of the month prior to publication.



## PREVENTION

### Preparation Is Key To Wildfire Season



**THE 2014 WILDLAND FIRE SEASON** will soon be here. Although there were devastating fires on federal lands in Oregon last year, none met the criteria needed for the governor to declare a Conflagration. Fire defense board chiefs, fire chiefs, deputy state fire marshals, and others closely monitored several of the fires and did a great job keeping us informed of the situations.

Federal incident management teams and some ODF IMTs were busy in Oregon, as well as the entire NW. Forecast-

ed lightning storms created a relatively minor number of “dry lightning” strikes (those most likely to start a fire) in Oregon, but that wasn’t the case elsewhere. The largest lightning outbreak missed Oregon by about 200 miles and started over 300 fires in Washington in one night.

Official fire season forecasts are anticipated to be completed and distributed this month. Preliminary indications are the 2013 fire season will be about the same as the 2012 fire season, maybe a little worse. We’ll only know the answer as the calls come in, or in November when we look back at what happened.

However, now is the time to get “tuned-up” for the demands of the fire season. With no mobilizations in 2012, and limited overhead team mobilizations in 2011, the question is how to remain current. The fact is, the best way to keep our IMTs current is to mobilize them often. The reality is, the fire circumstances, balanced with the fiscal responsibilities entrusted to us, will result in close scrutiny of every fire during the 2013 season, and future seasons. So, we face at least two challenges in this arena.

In early April, our IMT Training Conference will be held in preparation for the season. On May 6, the State Fire Defense Board will meet at Eagle Crest Resort in central Oregon to review the work of the off-season committees, discuss the 2013 edition of the Mobilization Plan, and hold the annual State Fire Defense Board meeting. This is the second year we are offering our Mobilization 101 class, the same day as our annual meeting. This year, we coordinated these meetings with the OFCA Conference schedule of events. We will discuss proposed changes to the Mobilization Plan.

Soon after, the approved 2013 Mobilization Plan will be available in hard copy and online. The second challenge is for everyone that may be called on to protect fellow citizens or their structures threatened by an advancing wildland

fire, must be trained, exercised, prepared, and ready to go. Maintaining current skills, practicing the business of managing large-scale and complex incidents,

and large wildland fire experience are challenges we face and must consider each year. At the same time, a significant success challenge is that we can’t send out more personnel than are justified to any one incident.

The old military adage (cleaned up a little), “proper planning prevents poor performance” is always true. The OSFM can help, but the responsibility to be prepared is up to you.

#

### BY THE NUMBERS



EVERY

**30 MINUTES**

A CIVILIAN FIRE INJURY IS REPORTED

**49%** OF U.S. HOME FIRES INVOLVE SOME TYPE OF

**ELECTRICAL FAILURE**

OR MALFUNCTION



EVERY

**85 SECONDS**

ONE RESIDENTIAL FIRE IS REPORTED

**67%** INCREASE IN **FIREFIGHTER DEATHS**

DUE TO TRAUMATIC INJURIES OVER THE PAST 30 YEARS

Source: UL, 2013

## PREVENTION

# Grass Fires

## Flint Hills Smoke Management

By Jason Hartman, Fire Protection Specialist, Kansas Forest Service Coordinator, Kansas Prescribed Fire Council

Mid-March through the end of April is the time of the year when large areas of Kansas' Flint Hills rangeland are burned. These burns are conducted to provide better forage for cattle, and to help control invasive species such as Eastern Red Cedar and Sumac. Well-planned and managed periodic burns can minimize fire

safety danger and are an inexpensive tool for managing rangeland.

Drought, for the last two burn seasons, has limited the number of acres in the Flint Hills that have been burned. With the return of moisture last summer and fall, there will be the opportunity for extensive burning in the Flint Hills this spring. For burns to be conducted safely and effectively, weather and rangeland conditions must be right. In years when these conditions are right, many landowners conduct burns at the same time. If these burns take place when meteorological conditions do not disperse the smoke, air pollutants from the burns can affect persons in the Flint Hills and can be carried long distances to more populated areas.

As a result of the development of the Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan, KDHE and Kansas State University created an informational website to inform ranchers and land managers on smoke impacts. This website also includes a modeling tool that those conducting burns may use to gain a better understanding of the impacts their smoke may have on populated areas of the state. For more information about the burning in the Flint Hills, the Flint Hills Smoke Management Plan, smoke modeling tool and the April burn restrictions associated with the plan, please visit the following website for more information: <http://www.ksfire.org>



## Fires, while beneficial, keep fire crews busy

By Eric Smith, Topeka Capital Journal— April 6, 2014

**PRAIRIE FIRES IN THE SPRING MONTHS** are as much of an annual ritual in Kansas as, say, good Sunflower State college hoops.

And while some question why the fires are started, fire experts agree, the benefits of the burning are crucial to keeping Kansas' prairie land alive.

Each year in the months of March and April, farmers and ranchers set pastures ablaze through the use of prescribed burns — that is, having a plan, then burning the grass by using fire as a tool with an end goal in mind.

Still, so far this year, the fire season has been unusual because of the strong winds causing problems just days after the burns were done correctly and responsibly.

"We want folks to get burning done, because we know it's good for the land,



STEPHANIE ERICKSON/OPTIMIZE PHOTOGRAPHY

Derek Brunin, a Rossville rancher, participates in a prescribed burn in a pasture recently not far from Topeka. Burns are crucial for maintaining prairie land, but recently, windy conditions have caused trouble for some firefighters.

# Grass Fires

Fires, while beneficial, keep fire crews busy (continued)

but we want it to be done safely,” said the Kansas Forest Service’s Jason Hartman, the fire prevention specialist for the state. “So going back and checking again the next day or the day after even is a recommendation that would make things safer this year.”



ERIC SMITH/THE CAPITAL-JOURNAL

This is an aluminum drip torch that farmers use in the process of prescribed burning. The one rancher Derek Brunin uses is a gas-diesel mix.

Kris Sanders, meteorologist with the National Service in Topeka, said this winter was unusually windy, and it carried over into the spring.

According to weather service data for the month of March, Topeka hit 40-plus mph peak wind gusts seven times, including four in the last six days of the month. March 30 and 31, when several fire calls were reported by county dispatchers — including one for a large wildfire northwest of Topeka that damaged several structures — the average wind speed

was 15.7 and 20.1 mph, respectively.

Additionally, for March 30 the maximum sustained wind speed was 31 mph, and the peak wind gust was 41 mph. For March 31, the maximum sustained wind speed was 31 and the peak gust was 44 mph. Other areas in northeast Kansas had similar windy numbers for March.

With all that in mind, the state statute for legal burning says the wind speed has to be 15 mph or lower.

So while farmers burned March 29 when the wind was an average speed of 4.9 and perfect for burning, the next few days caused havoc for fire crews.

“One gust of wind from a different direction could just change your whole day,” said Silver Lake fire chief Joe Hawkins, who said calls were up for his volunteer fire department this year, in large part because of the grass fires.

Hawkins said last year around this time, the department had just 55 calls. This year? They already have done 93. The 93rd didn’t come for them until May 28 last year.

“It’s just been kind of a weird season I would say. This is the rough time (for grass fires),” Hawkins said.

One farmer who hasn’t had any problem with his burns this year is Rossville’s Derek Brunin.

A rancher who has several acres of crops, as well as around 250 acres of pasture for his calf-cow operation,

Brunin has been around farming his whole life, including the institution of prescribed burning.

The 27-year-old, with several friends and family, burned around 200 acres of pasture two weekends ago on March 29 not far from Rossville with no troubles of wildfires.

While burning serves several purposes, including helping with wildlife habitats and prairie preservation, Brunin and his fellow ranchers use it to help make grazing better for their cattle. They need the fire to bulk up the calves to make more money to provide for their families.

As shown through studies at Kansas State University Research and Extension, cattle who graze on grass that was burned previously as opposed to the alternative are healthier and gain several more pounds.

“My biggest concern is, you know, a lot of people not involved in agriculture, they don’t understand,” Brunin said. “They probably think, ‘Oh yeah, they just don’t want to mow (the grass).’ There’s a lot more that burning accomplishes than just cleaning it up.”

Brunin said the key to a successful, safe burn is prep work and back burning, which creates a buffer around the desired burn area so it doesn’t escape into other areas.

While Brunin said he has never seen an out-of-control fire in person, Hartman said the Sunflower State is no slack for wildfires.

“We don’t make CNN like Montana or Colorado or California, but there are a lot of years actually where we’ll have more acres burned than those states will,” Hartman said. “But our fires, they’re over in four, five, six hours and then they’re done. That’s why we don’t really make national media news.

“We do get a few structures each year,” Hartman added, “and that’s unfortunate, but we don’t get dozens of houses lost all in one event like some of those western states do, fortunately.”

## PREVENTION



### Spring Time Means Propane Licensing for 2014

By Mike Wikle, Fire Prevention Inspector

It's spring time! And the Office of the State Fire Marshal's (OSFM) propane season is in full swing. Inspectors throughout Kansas will be visiting: propane bulk plants, dispensing stations, and cylinder exchange cabinet locations to ensure they meet current safety standards. Approximately 227 propane related inspections have been completed thus far for the 2013 season. The table to the right includes some of the recurring violations that our field inspectors are finding.

**Licensing Requirement.** The OSFM require all propane, bulk storage units, dispensing units, and cylinder exchange cabinets to be licensed and renewed on an annual basis. A common licensing violation is from cylinder exchange cabinets that do not have a current year, cylinder exchange cabinet, sticker on them. Before a cabinet can be put into service the company must inform OSFM of the location of where the cabinet is being placed and pay the licensing fee for the cabinet. This can be completed by filling out a class 6 propane application form and submitting it along with correct payment to our office.

**Signage.** The OSFM require that weather proof signs be located at all LP-Gas locations. Information on the sign should indicate the owner's name, facility address, 24/7 emergency number, and class 1 dealer license

number. Letters and numbers on signs must be at least 3 inches in height ( K.A.R 22-8-2). For cylinder exchange cabinets, each cabinet needs to be marked with the following terms and information: "PROPANE", "NO SMOKING", owner information, NFPA 704 Fire Diamond, and product information (K.A.R 22-8-17).

One of the more popular reasons cabinet signage is cited, is because signs have become illegible due to weathering. It is important that signage remains legible, so it can be easily read from a distance in the event of an emergency.

**Education Requirement.** The majority of the "Education Requirement" violations can be connected to the training requirements, for the cylinder exchange cabinet program participants. The OSFM requires that a designee be trained in LP-cylinder handling practices for each leased or contracted location. It is then the responsibility of the store designee to provide proper training to each employee involved in handling propane. Kansas Propane dealers and cylinder exchange participants can find an approved training booklet on the OSFM website to meet this requirement.

The OSFM would like to re-remind all Kansas Propane dealers that the 2013-2014 propane license renewal period runs between June 15 - July

15. All current licensed LP dealers should have received a renewal packet by April 2, 2014. If you have not received a Propane Renewal Packet, please contact the OSFM at 785-296-3401.

VIOLATIONS IN 2013	OCCURENCES
Licensing Requirement	87
Cabinet Signage	32
Education Requirement	18
Cabinet Protection	13
Cylinder Fire Extinguisher	9
Fire Extinguisher Annual Service	9
Combustible Storage Weeds, Grass, Trash	12
Emergency Shutoff Valve	7
Cabinet Location	7



## PREVENTION

### Educational Materials Available



**FIRE AND LIFE SAFETY EDUCATION** is provided through ongoing fire prevention programs as well as public awareness media campaigns to help educate everyone in making informed decisions regarding fire and life safety.

Fire Prevention programs are delivered through on-site presentations, class room instruction, press releases, newsletters and online.

Contact the Prevention Division at 785-296-0659 to request an on-site presentation or other education materials, or if you have questions regarding fire and life safety issues.



### Spring Cleaning Fire Safety Tips



Doing laundry is most likely part of your every day routine. But did you know how important taking care of your clothes dryer is to the safety of your home? With a few simple safety tips you can help prevent a clothes dryer fire.

- » Have your dryer installed and serviced by a professional.
- » Do not use the dryer without a lint filter.
- » Make sure you clean the lint filter before or after each load of laundry. Remove lint that has collected around the drum.
- » Rigid or flexible metal venting material should be used to sustain proper air flow and drying time.
- » Make sure the air exhaust vent pipe is not restricted and the outdoor vent flap will open when the dryer is operating. Once a year, or more often if you notice that it is taking longer than normal for your clothes to dry, clean lint out of the vent pipe or have a dryer lint removal service do it for you.
- » Keep dryers in good working order. Gas dryers should be inspected by a professional to make sure that the gas line and connection are intact and free of leaks.
- » Make sure the right plug and outlet are used and that the machine is connected properly.
- » Follow the manufacturer's operating instructions and don't overload your dryer.
- » Turn the dryer off if you leave home or when you go to bed.

### AND DON'T FORGET...

Dryers should be properly **grounded**.

Check the **outdoor vent** flap to make sure it is not covered by snow.

Keep the area around your dryer **clear** of things that can burn, like boxes, cleaning supplies and clothing, etc.

Clothes that have come in contact with **flammable substances**, like gasoline, paint thinner, or similar solvents should be laid outside to dry, then can be washed and dried as usual.

### FACT

- ! The leading cause of home clothes dryer fires is failure to clean them.

 **Your Source for SAFETY Information**  
NFPA Public Education Division • 1 Batterymarch Park, Quincy, MA 02169

[www.nfpa.org/education](http://www.nfpa.org/education)

## PREVENTION

# Hood Suppression Systems



By Mende Barnett, Education Consultant

### ON THE BORDER, KRISPY KREME, AND CHICK-FIL-A — what do they all have in common?

Not only are they some of the most popular places to eat, but they also cook with grease. Grease laden vapors combined with extreme heat can cause detrimental effects.

Generally, hood suppression systems are required to be installed when the cooking appliance is considered to be a source of ignition or fire risk. Equipment such as griddles, woks, skillets, deep fat fryers and cook-top ranges are also included in this category.

**32.3.3.8** – Cooking facilities, other than those with individual residential units, shall be protected in accordance with 9.2.3

**9.2.3** – Commercial cooking equipment shall be in accordance with NFPA 96.

Some cooking or ventilation equipment used in restaurant kitchens may not require fire protection

unless the cooking appliance is considered to be a source of ignition to the hood/and ductwork, or is mandated by the authority having jurisdiction. If the appliance can be a source of ignition to the hood and/or duct, and it does not have UL 300 listed fire suppression guidelines, it may not be an appliance type that has test procedures outlined in UL 300. In these types of applications, a manufacturer may choose to recommend protection guidelines listed for other equipment that is similar in operation, or if the application is considered less than or equal to the same fire risk. However, this option is generally not considered to be UL 300 listed.

When an appliance is considered a fire risk and a hood suppression system is required, it is necessary that these systems are installed properly and are taken care of.

Ventilation hoods shall be of approved construc-

tion. The hood shall be cleaned at frequent intervals to prevent build-up. Filters must be in place with no gaps and a manual activation device shall be clearly marked, accessible and located in the path of egress.

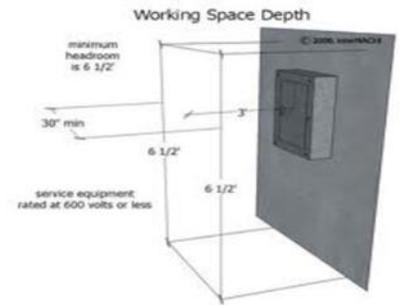
The system shall be serviced every six months by a certified firm and it shall include, testing the operation, activation of automatic fuel or power shutoffs, annual replacement of fusible links, annual replacement of automatic sprinkler heads, and update system service tag.

A thorough cleaning of hoods and ducts will help to eliminate any grease build up that can contribute to a fire starting. Other areas such as, fusible links and nozzles need to be kept clean of any debris and build up.

What's most important about any hood suppression system is its ability to save lives and property from fire and fire related injuries.

## National Electrical Code 2008 Edition

### 110.26 Depth of Working Space Around Electrical Panels and Equipment



Depending on interpretation, one could argue the clearances described in 110.26(A) are only required where it is “likely” that “examination, adjustment, servicing, or maintenance” are necessary while the equipment is energized. The clear working space that is required by the first sentence as described in 110.26 is outlined in the above example.

### 210.8 Where GFCI Outlets Should Be Located

GFCI outlets should be installed in any area that presents a risk of an electric shock with a direct path to the ground. In other words, anywhere you might directly touch the ground outside or anywhere where you might touch a part of the plumbing system.

Some smart GFCIs locations include exterior outlets, kitchen counter outlets, bathroom outlets, garage outlets, outlets in unfinished basements, near swimming pools and hot tubs.

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## PREVENTION

### All It Takes Is A Minute

By Mende Barnett, Education Consultant

Cooking is the leading cause of home fires in the U.S. and eighty-two percent of all fire deaths occur in the home.

We all do it, start a pan of boiling water and turn away, leave a dishtowel near the stove or heat up a pan of oil and walk away for a minute.

That's what Matt Williams, Topeka resident did one afternoon.

Matt spends a lot of time in his kitchen cooking, baking and preparing meals. This was a typical day for him as he was in his kitchen preparing lunch.

He poured some oil into a heated pan on his stove and turned around to get his other ingredients. In less than two minutes, the pan was engulfed with flames and smoke. He was putting out the fire when the microwave above the stove kicked on its internal fan. This caused a short in the system and the microwave caught fire inside of the unit.

This fire was more extensive and Matt was not able to put it out. He quickly called 911 and the fire department was dispatched to his home.

"Luckily no one was hurt and the appliances can be replaced. I only stepped away from the stove for a minute, which I have done a thousand times", Matt said.

Per NFPA, two-thirds of home cooking fires started with the ignition of food or other cooking materials. Ranges accounted for the largest share of home cooking fire incidents and ovens accounted for more than 16%.

By following some basic cooking safety tips we can reduce these percentages.

- Never leave cooking unattended (even for a minute)
- Keep towels and pot holders away from flames and heating elements
- Keep cooking surfaces clean to prevent grease buildup
- Make sure when finished cooking all appliances are turned off



## INVESTIGATION

### Kansas Chapter International Association of Arson Investigators' **Investigator of the Year**



Brett Seecat was sentenced to life in prison in August.

The Office of the State Fire Marshal Investigator Brad Agnew and Kansas Bureau of Investigation Special Agent David Falletti received the Kansas Chapter of International Associate of Arson Investigators' Investigator of the Year award.

Investigator Brad Agnew and Special Agent David Falletti received the award for their hard work, dedication and commitment to serving the citizens of Kansas with the murder and aggravated arson case in Kingman, Kansas. The

case had additional challenges in that, the suspect was a previous law enforcement officer and instructor at the state's law enforcement training academy. The incident occurred April 30, 2011.

The trial was held in June 2013 with the conviction of Brett Seecat on first degree premeditated murder, aggravated arson and two counts of aggravated endangering of a child. On August 5, 2013, Mr. Seecat was sentenced to life plus 75 months and restitution to the Crime Victims Compensation Fund.

Special Agent David Falletti was not able to attend the presentation that was held at the Kansas Chapter IAAI banquet on February 5, 2013 in Wichita, Kansas. ■



Captain Stu Bevis, Wichita Fire Department; Investigator Brad Agnew; and Regional Special Agent in Charge, Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosive, Doug Monty, who also worked on the case.



Kansas IAAI president John Mattox congratulates Investigator Brad Agnew on his achievement.



KBI investigator Dave Falletti opens an evidence envelope during the murder trial of Brett Seecat in Kingman County, Kan., District Court on Tuesday, May 28, 2013.

## INVESTIGATION

# Arson in America

# ARSON

## America's 'grossly underreported' arsons hide public safety threat

By THOMAS HARGROVE, Scripps News

NEW YORK – It was one of the deadliest fires in New York City in recent years.

Guatemala-born Miguel Chan was so desperate to save his family that he threw his infant daughter out the window of his burning Brooklyn apartment. She survived, others did not.

"I lost my wife, my four friends," Chan says of the Jan. 30, 2010 fire. Police immediately suspected arson and three days later arrested Daniel Ignacio, a neighbor who confessed he was drunk and influenced by "demons or devils" when he set the apartment fire killing five Guatemalans.

It was an open-and-shut case of arson to everyone – except the federal government.

Like 99 percent of New York's arsons, the intentional fire that killed Miguel Chan's wife and his friends was never reported into the federal database that tracks arson in America.

"This is unbelievable. Everyone knows that this was an arson," said the Rev. Erick Salgado, pastor of Chan's Guatemalan church who helped police make an arrest.

Just 5 percent of all residential building fires are intentionally set, according to the National Fire Incident Reporting System – or NFIRS – the world's largest, national database of annual fire incident information and part of the Department of Homeland Security.

But arson actually is much more common than is reported by the U.S. government, Scripps News found in a yearlong national investigation. Most acts of arson in America go unreported to the federal government, the investigation found.

For example, in 2011:

- Chicago reported just 61 building arsons when it had at least 192.
- Houston said it had 25 intentional fires when it really had 224.
- Indianapolis reported no arsons when it should have reported at least 216.
- New York told of just 11 arsons instead of 1,347 it really discovered.

In all, Scripps contacted 10 fire departments in America's largest cities to ask for case-by-case records of their arsons to compare what was reported to NFIRS against what should have been reported.

One city, Detroit, said it could not produce a complete arson count or make its records available because the financially-strapped city lacks the personnel to do so.

"This is a modest guess, but I think 75 percent of our fires are arson, maybe more," said El Don Parham, Detroit's chief of fire investigations. "We are not able to cover (investigate) even half of our fires. We have to prioritize."

The nine remaining cities did report data, although New York has yet to give the exact locations and dates of its arsons. These cities originally reported 652 arsons to the federal government in 2011, but actually detected at least 2,754 deliberately set fires that year.



The scene Jan. 30, 2010, outside the apartment building that claimed the lives of five people, including Luisa Chan, 34.

That means three-fourths of the arsons uncovered by investigators in those cities went unreported to the U.S. Fire Administration, masking a major threat to public safety.

"Arson is grossly underreported," concluded Bill Degnan, New Hampshire's fire marshal and the president of the National Association of State Fire Marshals. "I believe the rate of arson in America is somewhere between 40 percent and 50 percent, in that range."

The quality of the federal data is haphazard and the underreporting of

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## America's 'grossly underreported' arsons hide public safety threat (continued)

arson could have serious consequences:

- Cities and towns are not focusing enough of America's 1.1 million firefighters to combat arson.
- Up to half of the 3,000 fire deaths each year should be treated as homicides.
- Arsonists may remain at large, free to burn.
- Much of the \$15.5 billion paid last year by insurance companies (and their clients) should be contested since arson often involves fraud.

**“**This is a modest guess, but I think 75 percent of our fires are arson, maybe more.

*El Don Parham, Detroit's chief of fire investigations*

**”**

The U.S. Fire Administration has given out \$4 billion in grants to participate in NFIRS without penalties for inaccurate information. The agency does not audit the reporting.

About 23,000 fire departments in all 50 states and the District of Columbia report to NFIRS each year. The database comprises 75 percent of all reported fires in America annually. But most of America's fire departments -- especially small and volunteer fire units -- don't report any arson activity in their communities.

According to Scripps' study of 1 million building fires reported from 2006 through 2011 to the U.S. Fire Administration, more than half of the departments who report to NFIRS said that none of the 140,000 building fires they fought were intentionally set.

The Scripps investigation found that every major city it contacted has failed to report significant numbers of arsons. And there are many reasons why.

The worst was New York City, which in 2010 reported only 19 acts of arson in building fires even though its Bureau of Fire Investigation found there were at least 1,486 intentional building fires that year.

City fire administrators say it's a technology issue and deny there was any motive in not reporting the 2010 fire at Miguel Chan's apartment as arson.

"This was an administrative and clerical thing. We aren't trying to keep anything quiet or secretive," said Jim Long, spokesman for the Fire Department of New York. "We were holding press conferences in which we identified that as an incendiary fire."

The city's Bureau of Fire Investigation actually detects arson in about 40 percent of the cases it investigates in recent years. Detectives at the Bureau of Fire Investigation have their own reporting system which does not have a physical link to NFIRS.

"We are working toward linking those two databases," Long said.

The Houston Fire Department reports only about one in every eight arsons it detects to federal authorities. In 2011, according to the Scripps review, it detected at least 224 arsons, but reported only 25 of them to the U.S. Fire Administration.

As was common with many of the departments contacted in the investigation, Houston officials said there is disconnect between the firefighters who battle blazes and the arson investigators who search for their causes.

"It's the firefighters on the trucks who are filling out the NFIRS reports. We don't," said Deputy Chief Ed Arthur, head of Houston's Arson Bureau. "But they are not going to know what cause the fires. We make that determination."

Degnan said the National Association of State Fire Marshals is aware

of the problem and established a group a year ago to investigate why most arsons go unreported. The group will make recommendations in January calling for the nation's fire departments to "close the loop" and report the outcomes of their arson investigations, he said.

He also said local investigators often are reluctant, even fearful, to report arson to NFIRS.

"Unfortunately, many people shy away from making the correct call even though they might believe that a fire is incendiary," Degnan said. "They are concerned that they are going to be 'called in' if they call it wrong."

Firefighters have told his group that "making the call" -- declaring the cause of a fire -- means putting their reputation on the line with their chiefs. Many don't want to risk making a wrong call. That means a lot of fires go down as "cause undetermined" or permanently "under investigation."

Officials with the U.S. Fire Administration have declined repeated requests for interviews, including requests via certified mail.

John R. Hall Jr., research director at the National Fire Protection Association, a non-profit group that sets investigation standards, defends the low arson estimates.

"Over the years I've had fire chiefs and fire officers tell me that they think the arson numbers are underreported. They've been of the view that it's half or more than half," Hall said. "They always assume they know better than the data."

Most arsons in Houston, as in New York, are reported to NFIRS as "under investigation."

Among the fires still waiting for resolution more than two years later is the much-publicized Jan. 3, 2011 blaze that destroyed a \$2 million Victorian-style home in Houston's trendy Heights neighborhood that killed Evelyn "Patti" Worthington, 68, and her caretaker. The city arson squad still lists the cause as "pending."

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## America's 'grossly underreported' arsons hide public safety threat (continued)

"Obviously, it would be good for everyone if there was a final resolution to this," said Worthington's ex-husband, David Worthington of Naples, Fla. "Was it an accident? Possibly. But it's hard to surmise what happened."

One of Worthington's neighbors, Bart Truxillo, isn't surprised fire investigators are slow in making a call in the Worthington fire since he, personally, saw them call another one wrong. Fire investigators at first blamed faulty wiring for two deaths in a home Truxillo owned until an insurance investigator proved that Annie Caballero, 22, had died before the fire started 13 years ago. The case is now considered an unsolved homicide.

"All the fire department did was to bring their dog to sniff around, but they didn't find anything," said Truxillo. "They were going to take the easy way out. Thank God for that insurance investigator."

Scripps also found serious technical problems that distorted arson information in many fire departments. The Colorado Springs Fire Department, for example, reported all 677 fires as "cause undetermined" from 2009 to 2011, even though its arson unit has identified at least 273 intentional fires. Authorities there have promised to fix the problem.

The worst such glitch was at the Indianapolis Fire Department, which reported to NFIRS only a single arson over a six-year period, even though the arson unit in the nation's 12th-largest city finds 400 or more deliberate fires each year.

Indianapolis opened its books to the Scripps review, which found that 32 percent of all fires causing at least \$5,000 damage in Indianapolis were intentionally set. The city had reported an arson rate of zero for many years to federal authorities, who never challenged the data.

Gregory Gates, battalion chief of special operations in Indianapolis, said he believes the city's arson rate is even higher because many intentional fires are missed. The city, like

most communities, lacks sufficiently trained investigators to probe every fire, he said.

"Arson for us is somewhere between 50 percent and 70 percent," Gates said. "We have as many fires that are listed as 'undetermined' that are actually arsons as we have that are listed as arsons."

The consequences of improperly detected and reported arsons are severe, fire officials warn.

Nearly 3,000 Americans die each year in fires. Only about 300 of those deaths are attributed to arson, according to the U.S. Fire Administration, and, therefore, are legally regarded as homicides. But if arsons actually account for up to half of the nation's fires, hundreds of homicides could go undetected and uninvestigated each year.

"Unfortunately, if the fire is not fully investigated and the scientific method of fire investigation is (not) used to determine the origin and cause, a person could go free because of that not being reported correctly," New Hampshire's Degnan said.

Homeowner insurance fire losses in 2011 were about \$15.5 billion, accounting for 27 percent of all insurance payouts.

"Arson has always been around and always been a concern. But we haven't heard that there is significant underreporting," said David Corum, vice president of the American Institute for Chartered Property Casualty Underwriters based in Malvern, Pa., and head of its research arm, the Insurance Research Council, which is funded by the nation's largest insurance companies.

Corum said his group will begin a study into unreported arsons.

"If it really is 40 percent or 50 percent, well, that is shocking. That would be a real wake-up call," Corum said. "If these numbers are correct, then there is a significant problem with awareness and attention on this issue. We will take a look at this."

Degnan and others warn underreported arson means America's policy-makers are not allocating money and manpower correctly to suppress fire since intentional fire setting is not a priority in most communities.

One recent federal study from the National Institute of Standards and Technology and the U.S. Forestry Service suggests that America's arson problem – if undercounted and ignored – could worsen any community's decline into social disorder, an effect sometimes called the "Broken Windows" theory.

"The consequence of not having the right measurement of arson is that we underappreciate the size of the problem," said NIST economist David Butry, one of the study's authors. "That certainly would affect how it is prioritized by society."

Their study concluded that "crime prevention and urban revitalization programs may be as valuable as fire suppression and law enforcement" in fighting arson.

Until NFIRS was created in 1977, there had been no formal gathering of U.S. fire statistics. As an incentive for fire departments to participate in the program, the U.S. Fire Administration has paid more than \$4 billion in Assistance to Firefighter Grants since the program was started more than a decade ago. The grant program does not stipulate that information must be accurate for a department to receive the grants.

Brad Pabody, chief of the National Fire Data Center, wrote in an e-mail in April to say the federal administration "does not audit NFIRS reports" because of resource limitations.

# Support the Fallen Firefighter Memorial



In 2001, legislation was signed that authorized the construction of a memorial to be built on the Capitol grounds in Topeka to honor Kansas firefighters who have lost their lives in the line of duty.

A scaled replica can be viewed at the Office of the State Fire Marshal. The OSFM also transports the replica to fire service events across the state.

If you would like to contribute towards the construction of the Kansas Fallen Firefighters Memorial, please send your tax deductible donation to:

Firefighters Memorial Fund  
Attn: Eldred Wenger  
Kansas Department of Administration, DFM  
900 SW Jackson St., Room 600  
Topeka, KS 66612