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NEWS RELEASE



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District Attorney Closes Criminal Review of Balcom & Mountain Fires

VENTURA, Calif. – The Ventura County District Attorney's Office is announcing today that it has concluded its review of the Balcom and Mountain Fires, finding no criminal liability for the October 30, 2024, and November 6, 2024, incidents.

After receiving a comprehensive investigation from the Ventura County Fire Department and California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire), which consisted of 360 gigabytes of data, 2,800 electronic files and several thousand pages of reports, the Ventura County District Attorney's Office assigned a team of prosecutors to carefully analyze the investigation for potential criminal charges. In doing so, the District Attorney's Office learned that a tractor driver was clearing brush on the afternoon of October 30, 2024, on a hillside in unincorporated Ventura County near Balcom Canyon Road and Bixby Road in the community of Somis. He was using a four-wheel drive tractor with a flail shredder attachment to clear dry vegetation and prepare the area for cattle grazing when he noticed smoke and fire coming from the engine. The driver immediately drove the tractor to an area that he had cleared and called for help. Thereafter, firefighters responded and suppressed the 1.8 acre blaze by utilizing water hose lines, deploying hand crews and dropping 4,000 gallons of fire retardant from an air tanker. Ventura County firefighters, in conjunction with a nearby property owner, also utilized bulldozers to clear vegetation around the fire area to limit its spread.

In the intervening week between the Balcom and Mountain Fires, arson investigators, firefighters, and civilians visited the location of the October 30 incident.

On the morning of November 6, 2024, a nearby resident called 9-1-1 to report that smoke and fire were visible from the same area as the previous week's fire. That morning and preceding evening were marked by an Extreme Red Flag Warning, also known as a Particularly Dangerous Situation, for its low humidity, dry conditions and forceful winds. Known as the Mountain Fire, it would go on

to burn nearly 20,000 acres and damage or destroy 369 structures. Arson investigators determined that the cause of the Mountain Fire was heated tire debris from the Balcom Fire that became dislodged and dispersed into unburned vegetation downwind from the tractor.

The District Attorney's Office arson team looked specifically at the facts, evidence and circumstances surrounding the October 30 operation of the tractor to determine criminal culpability in both fires. The conclusion is that the tractor driver acted neither maliciously nor recklessly to support a criminal filing. There is no evidence that the driver knew in advance that the tractor would catch fire and ignored that risk and used it anyway to clear brush. To the contrary, the driver was a 24-year labor contractor with extensive experience operating tractors and performing vegetation abatement in Ventura County. While the reason the tractor caught fire is unknown, there is no evidence that the operator drove it with the intention of starting a fire or operated the machinery aware that one could occur.

The Ventura County District Attorney's Office has closed its criminal review of the Balcom and Mountain Fires and wishes to thank the Ventura County Fire Department and Cal Fire for their comprehensive and thorough investigation.