

WILDFIRES

Rash of Oregon arson cases fuels fear, conspiracy theories during devastating wildfires

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By [Shane Dixon Kavanaugh | The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

At least six men across Oregon have been accused of intentionally setting blazes during a disastrous wildfire season that has burned [more than a million acres](#), killed [at least nine people](#) and annihilated homes, [entire towns](#) and beloved natural areas.

None of them have ties to left- or right-wing groups or appear to have been motivated by politics, according to police and court records reviewed by The Oregonian/OregonLive.

Only one of the accused fire starters, a southern Oregon man with a history of methamphetamine use, is accused of [damaging more than a dozen homes](#) and endangering people's lives. Prosecutors say another man in Lane County caused hundreds of acres to burn near a sleepy timber town.

The remaining four — whose criminal records point to drug addiction, homelessness and mental illness — are suspected in much smaller fires that were quickly put out, according to authorities and court documents.

Still, the alleged acts have stoked fears amid a natural catastrophe unrivaled in Oregon's recent past and fueled speculation into the causes behind some of the state's largest and most devastating wildfires.

So far, only one of the state's major conflagrations, [the Almeda fire in Jackson County](#), is being investigated as a crime. The causes in at least eight others — including the Riverside fire in Clackamas County, the Archie Creek fire in Douglas County and Brattain fire in Lake County — remain unknown at this time.

Meanwhile, downed utility lines in Marion and Lane counties may have started some of the blazes that fed the deadly Beachie Creek and [Holiday Farm fires](#), according to state officials and witnesses.

State arson detectives are stumped about what's driving the people accused in the rash of smaller fires, said Capt. Tim Fox, a spokesman with Oregon State Police.

Glenn Corbett, a professor of fire science at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, said he also was perplexed.

"We have the normal knuckleheads out there every year who flick a cigarette butt or let a campfire grow out of hand," Corbett said. "What you're dealing with right now appears pretty unusual."

Court records offer some clues.

About a week before raging winds on Labor Day triggered megafires across the state, a wildland blaze erupted Aug. 30 near Mapleton west of Eugene.

The so-called Sweet Creek Fire, which ultimately consumed more than 300 acres, appeared intentionally set to first responders at the scene, according to a probable cause affidavit obtained by The Oregonian/OregonLive.

Sheriff's deputies in Lane County [arrested Elias Newton Pendergrass](#), 44, on suspicion of first-degree arson two days later. Pendergrass, whose prior convictions include animal abuse and domestic assault, had threatened to burn down Mapleton if his girlfriend broke up with him and also admitted to setting the fire, court documents allege.

Earlier in the summer, Douglas County prosecutors indicted Jedediah Ezekiel Fulton, 39, on first-degree arson and other charges after authorities found him armed with a machete and setting fires in the woods outside Glide, according to court records.

"Jedediah was mad because the guy from (the Douglas Forest Protection Association) would not help him and not give him a ride to town," Deputy Joshua Merritt wrote in a probable cause affidavit.

Fulton had [made national headlines](#) in 2018 after he vandalized a McDonald's that refused to make him 30 double cheeseburgers. He was later convicted of second-degree criminal mischief and second-degree criminal trespassing, court documents show.

Both suspected arson cases received widespread attention last week as different wildfires ripped through Oregon towns and treasured forests, some of them growing to more than 100,000 acres in a matter of days.

Each also helped [fuel conspiracy theories](#) about anti-fascist activists starting the wildfires around the state, prompting local and county law enforcement officials as well as the FBI to emphatically rebut the claims.

"Rumors spread just like wildfire and now our dispatchers and professional staff are being overrun with requests for information and inquiries on an UNTRUE rumor that Antifa members have been arrested for setting fires," the Douglas County Sheriff's Office posted to Facebook. "THIS IS NOT TRUE!"

Those pushing the conspiracy theories also pointed to the Almeda fire in southern Oregon, which destroyed 3,000 homes in the communities of Ashland, Talent, Phoenix and Medford.

Ashland Police Chief Tighe O'Meara told The Oregonian/OregonLive in an email that rumors claiming anti-fascists were involved are "100% false information."

Jackson County authorities believe the blaze had two points of origin, one in Ashland and the other in Phoenix. Both are being investigated as arson cases and police last week arrested a suspect in the Phoenix fire.

Michael Jarrod Bakkela, 41, faces nearly three dozen criminal counts, including charges of arson, criminal mischief and reckless endangerment. Prosecutors allege that he set a fire near railroad tracks that damaged 15 properties and endangered the lives of 14 people between Phoenix and Medford.

Court records show felony drug convictions for Bakkela, described by sheriff's deputies as having no permanent address, dating back to 1997, most of them related to methamphetamine possession. Police say they found meth on him when he was taken into custody Sept. 8.

Those suspected of intentionally setting fires in other parts of the state also have troubled backgrounds.

Jonathan Wayne Maas, 44, of Springfield faces first-degree arson charges after Lane County deputies say he started a blaze Sept. 9 near a disc golf course in Dexter, about 20 miles from the Holiday Farm fire that has now grown to 170,000 acres.

Maas, whose previous convictions include forgery, burglary, credit card fraud and felon in possession of a firearm, told authorities he threw a flare into a forested area with the hopes of starting a fire, court records allege.

Two days later, on Sept. 11, police say Samuel Piatt, 53, set a large pile of leaves ablaze outside a social services building in Oregon City, which at the time was under a Level 2 evacuation — "get set to go" — order because of the nearby Riverside fire in rural Clackamas County.

"I like the smell of smoke," Piatt told the arresting officer, according to court documents. Piatt, who is homeless, was on probation for multiple drug convictions. He now faces first-degree arson charges.

Finally, in Portland, another homeless man was arrested twice within a span of 12 hours on Sept. 13 and 14 on suspicion of lighting multiple brush fires along Interstate 205 near East Burnside Street.

Officers cited Domingo Lopez Jr., 45, with seven counts of reckless burning and took him to a hospital for a mental health evaluation, Portland police said.

Corbett, the professor of fire science, said mental health factors coupled with the all-consuming nature of the state's wildfires could be "turning on a switch" for a number of these arson suspects.

"All that people are talking about right now is these fires, it's on TV and in the newspapers," he said. "I would imagine this could be sort of a motivator for people who had those types of tendencies to begin with. It can certainly move them to becoming a participant."

Then again, Corbett said, he's never quite encountered a situation like this.

"Under normal circumstances this really wouldn't be something we'd be talking about."

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