

Contra Costa County Fire Protection District

Press Release

Subject: Serial Arsonist Arrest
Pittsburg, Antioch, and Bay Point areas

Release Date: December 21, 2011

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Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Fire Investigators, assisted by the Pittsburg Police Department, arrested arson suspect, Thomas Hartman, 53 years old, from Pittsburg late Thursday afternoon December 15th after a Superior Court Judge issued a warrant for his arrest.

Hartman was identified as the suspect in a very complex and lengthy serial arson investigation conducted by Fire District Investigators over the past six months led by Investigator Vic Massenkoff. The investigation occurred in the Cities of Antioch and Pittsburg and at seven commercial/retail shopping centers. Fires that had been occurring at these locations had been identified in June 2011 and had occurred as far back as January 2010. The most recent fire in the investigation occurred on December 3rd 2011.

Investigators became aware of Hartman by using sophisticated surveillance systems and techniques as well as good old fashioned police work. Investigators were assisted by Antioch and Pittsburg PD as well as Cal Fire and ATF.

Hartman is suspected of setting numerous fires in dumpsters located behind the shopping centers. As many as 72 fires were evaluated and over 50 fires are believed to be associated to Hartman. Many dumpsters were damaged by the fires, some more than once and some of the buildings received heat and smoke damage to their exterior walls. Almost every fire that occurred had the potential to cause more damage but no one was injured. The estimated loss in these fires is in the tens of thousands of dollars.

The Contra Costa County Fire Protection District Fire Investigation Unit is a specialized and dedicated unit staffed by three full-time fire investigators. In 2010, they investigated almost 600 fires throughout the cities and county areas served by the Fire District. They are one of the few dedicated units that exist in a fire department that investigate fire related crime in the state.

Owners of retail establishments and large-box retailers are encouraged to increase lighting and video surveillance of their own in the rear storage and utility areas of their stores. These areas are out of sight of the general public; however a high degree of illegal dumping and other illegal activities often takes place behind these stores. Fires in dumpsters and other outdoor storage areas pose a direct threat to the adjacent buildings as well as increased hazards to firefighters and the general public when resources need to be committed to fighting these preventable fires. Owners are encouraged to keep dumpsters locked and away from buildings. Don't allow them to overflow and have them emptied frequently.

If anyone has any information regarding this case they can call the Fire District's Arson Tip Line at 1-866-502-7766. If anyone recognizes Hartman or has any information regarding the dumpster fires they are encouraged to call.

A PRESS CONFERENCE IS TENTATIVELY SCHEDULED FOR 12:00 PM ON FRIDAY, DECEMBER 23RD AT THE FIRE INVESTIGATION UNIT OFFICES, 200 E. 6TH STREET, PITTSBURG.