



Wisconsin Wildfire Started by Logging Operations

AP Associated Press By TODD RICHMOND Associated Press
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Prosecutors announced Thursday they won't file charges against loggers whose equipment apparently started a massive wildfire in northwestern Wisconsin, concluding there was no criminal intent or negligence.

The fire began Tuesday afternoon in the woods near Simms Lake in Douglas County, about 40 miles southeast of Duluth, Minn. It consumed 8,131 acres, destroyed 17 homes and forced dozens of people to evacuate before firefighters contained it late Wednesday evening. No injuries have been reported.

The state Department of Natural Resources released a statement Thursday saying logging equipment started the fire.

A logger was operating a large machine similar to an end loader with a circular saw that cuts groups of trees, DNR Fire Law Enforcement Specialist Gary Bibow said. The operator noticed smoke coming from under the cutting head, jumped out of the cab and saw the grass under the machine was burning.

The operator nearly had extinguished the fire when it leaped 40 yards into the trees and raced out of control, Bibow said.

"He thought he had it out, and it took off," Bibow said. "It climbed into the top of the trees."

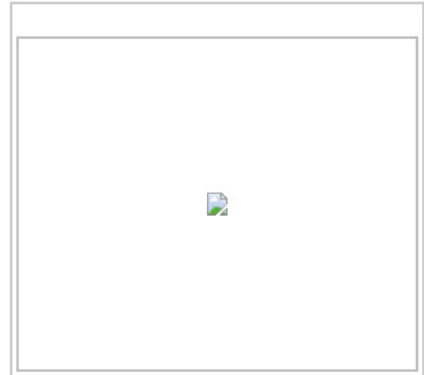
Another member of the logger's crew immediately called 911, according to the DNR's statement.

It's still unclear whether the machine caught fire or created sparks as it was cutting, DNR spokeswoman Catherine Koele said. Neither she nor Bibow knew the name of the loggers' company.

The DNR said in its statement that Douglas County prosecutors had decided there was no criminal intent or negligence and they had declined to issue any charges.

Douglas County Assistant District Attorney Ruth Kressel said in an email to The Associated Press nothing suggests the fire was started intentionally.

"We realize how tragic this fire has been and the devastation to homes, buildings and to our north woods, but ... the origin and cause of the fire lack the requisite intent for criminal charges," she said.



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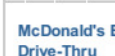
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The fire was one of the worst to strike northern Wisconsin in three decades.

Firefighters from nearly 40 departments battled the blaze. The National Guard sent two Black Hawk helicopters Wednesday to help, and two Canadian waterbombers, which are fixed-wing aircraft, also helped ground crews, according to the DNR. At least 60 people had to evacuate. About 20 spent Tuesday night in a Red Cross shelter in a high school.

Authorities told retired police officer Bob Gotelaere to evacuate Tuesday, but he decided to return home to save antique guns from his grandfather and his daughter's needlepoint work. He and a friend threaded their way along the back roads to reach the house on Ellison Lake.

Then the wind shifted. The fire came roaring toward them in a soup of orange smoke.

"There were flames all around the house. The embers were coming down in the yard. You couldn't see because of the smoke. (His friend) was screaming at me, 'We've got to go, we've got to go,'" the 67-year-old Gotelaere said. "It was unreal."

They barely made it out, Gotelaere said by phone Thursday. He spent the night with his friend and made his way back to his property Wednesday, fully expecting to find his house reduced to ashes. He discovered the fire had taken his brother-in-law's seasonal mobile home across the street as well as his own outhouse.

Somehow, though, the fire spared the house.

"I expected to find nothing," he said. "I just looked and couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it."

And he learned a lesson: Get out and stay out.

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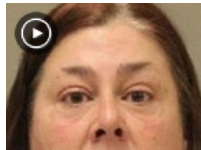
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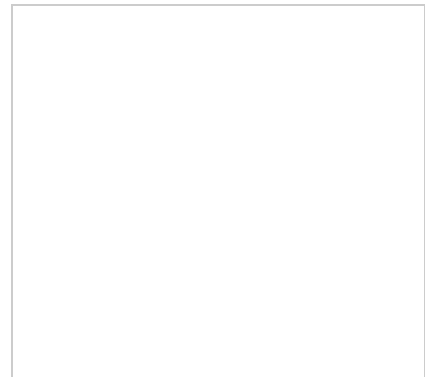
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