



Ventura County Fire Protection District

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FIRE INVESTIGATION REPORT

FI Report #: 24-14109

Date: October 30, 2024

Incident #: 24-0092680

Incident Location: Balcom Canyon Road/Bixby Road, Somis, CA 93015

Incident Type: Vehicle/Vegetation Fire **Area:** Somis

Fire Investigator Specialist: Andrea Stanley, IV14

This record has been redacted by V. Barajas, Administrative Assistant VCFPD-Custodian of Records Office, to comply with privacy and privileged information, and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) 12/2/2025

SUMMARY/ABSTRACT:

The use and negligent operation of a Kubota tractor with Gearmore Flail Shredder (GFS) implement resulted in a fire. The Kubota with GFS implement was positioned in mixed-fuel vegetation, which included, but was not limited to, annual grasses, yucca, and chaparral. The vegetation was exposed to the Kubota with GFS implement and ultimately resulted in approximately a 1.8 acre vegetation fire identified as the Balcom Fire.

VCFD Fire Investigator Specialist Christine SAQUI (IV13) assisted me in this investigation.

The investigation revealed violations of California Public Resource (PRC) and Health and Safety (H&S) Codes.

The violations are as follows:

PUBLIC RESOURCES CODE § 4435

If any fire originates from the operation or use of any engine, machine, barbecue, incinerator, railroad rolling stock, chimney, or any other device which may kindle a fire, the occurrence of the fire is prima facie evidence of negligence in the maintenance, operation, or use of such engine, machine, barbecue, incinerator, railroad rolling stock, chimney, or other device. If such fire escapes from the place where it originated and it can be determined which person's negligence caused such fire, such person is guilty of a misdemeanor.

HEALTH & SAFETY CODE § 13000

Every person is guilty of a misdemeanor who allows a fire kindled or attended by him to escape from his control or to spread to the lands of any person other than the builder of the fire without using every reasonable and proper precaution to prevent the fire from escaping.

LOCATION/DESCRIPTION:

The fire was west of Bixby Road in Somis, Ventura County, California. The fire was located in an area surrounded by steep hillsides and canyons within a mixed fuel bed of vegetation. The jurisdiction was within the State Responsibility Area (SRA). The southwestern edge of the fire was located at approximately 34°19'20"N, 118°57'58"W, and the northeastern at approximately 34°19'23"N, 118°57'53"W. An unnamed dirt road surrounded the burned vegetation along the south and east edges. There were two spot fires east of the unnamed dirt road. Refer to the drone footage captured on 10/31/24 for further perimeter detail. The fire was contained to parcel number 108011004, which is approximately 480 acres.

Parcel Information:

Assessor's Parcel Number (APN): 108011004
Acreage: 480
Owner Name: SCHEIFERLE, Donald-Janice TR
Mailing Address: P.O. Box 227
Santa Paula, California 93061
Landline Phone Number: [REDACTED]
Cell Phone Number: [REDACTED]

Equipment:

2023 Kubota M5-111 4x4, Serial Number: [REDACTED]
Gearmore Flail Shredder, Series GHF90-FS, Serial Number: [REDACTED]

Weather:

The following information was the weather near or at the time of dispatch.

October 30, 2024, 2:50 PM- SCE Bixby Road

Temperature: 69 degrees Fahrenheit

Dewpoint: 48 degrees Fahrenheit

Relative Humidity: 47 Percent

Wind Direction: From the south/southwest at four miles per hour (MPH), with gusts to nine MPH.

Weather was taken from a Remote Automatic Weather Station (RAWS) operated by Southern California Edison (SCE) in conjunction with the National Weather Service. This station records weather measurements every ten minutes at 34.31861 degrees latitude by - 118.96018 degrees longitude. Measurements were representative of conditions at the scene.

Kestrel Weather

-Refer to the Kestrel attachment for weather taken at 4:38 PM. The weather captured on the Kestrel was comparable to the readings reported for SCE Bixby Road at 4:30 PM.

EVIDENCE:

Photographs/Video

October 30, 2024

- Refer to the photographs/video for the above date.
- No physical evidence was collected from the scene.

October 31, 2024

- Refer to the photographs/video and Unmanned Aerial System (UAS) footage for the above date.
- No physical evidence was collected from the scene.

ARRIVAL/CONDITIONS:

On October 30, 2024, at approximately 2:54 PM, the Ventura County Fire Department's (VCFD) Fire Communication Center (FCC) received a 911 call reporting smoke.

I was on duty as Investigator 14 (IV14), a fire investigator with jurisdiction over the VCFD service area. I was dispatched to the call at approximately 3:07 PM.

I arrived near the intersection of Balcom Canyon Road and Bixby Road at approximately 4:00 PM. Access to the fire was delayed due to the fire's remote location and ongoing firefighting efforts.

I checked in with the Incident Commander (IC), VCFD Fire Battalion Chief Ron OATMAN (B24), on Bixby Road. OATMAN confirmed that access should be possible along a dirt road just north of his location, marked with yellow and blue flagging. I arrived at the fire scene at approximately 4:40 PM.

When I arrived at the fire scene, firefighters were actively engaged in suppression efforts of an ongoing vegetation fire, including aerial and ground suppression efforts. I saw active smoke production coming from approximately two acres of burned vegetation. Due to the amount of smoke, visibility was limited into the burned area.

I observed a dozer and a water truck parked on the unnamed dirt road east of the burned vegetation (this equipment was later identified as belonging to Donald "Donny" LYNCH; refer to D. LYNCH interview later in this report).

I observed firefighting hose lines around the majority of the perimeter and an air tanker retardant drop that spanned the fire's edge from the southwest to the northeast. The perimeter of the fire, not covered by the air tanker retardant drop, was surrounded by the unnamed dirt road.

VCFD personnel told me a witness (later identified as D. LYNCH) told them a tractor had caught fire. VCFD personnel believed D. LYNCH was still near the fire scene for additional questions. D. Lynch and I had a conversation. The following is a summary of our conversation and is not meant to represent the entirety of the statement:

D. LYNCH had received a phone call from Guillermo VENEGAS reporting a fire where work was being performed by one of VENEGAS's employees. VENEGAS's employee (identified as Jose A. MORALES ESQUIVEL) told VENEGAS the tractor caught fire. *NOTE:* I will refer to Jose A. MORALES ESQUIVEL as MORALES for the remainder of this report, as this is the surname he prefers to go by.

D. LYNCH immediately called his son, Parker LYNCH (P. LYNCH), and told him to grab their water truck and head to the area of the fire.

D. LYNCH and P. LYNCH provided their contact information for an official statement at a later time. D. LYNCH provided contact information for VENEGAS.

D. LYNCH contacted VENEGAS to see if he could meet with SAQUI for a statement near Bixby Road. D. LYNCH told me VENEGAS would be waiting for SAQUI's arrival. I contacted SAQUI and provided her with VENEGAS's contact information (*Refer to SAQUI's Supplemental Report*).

SCENE EXAMINATION:

October 30, 2024

I conducted an initial scene survey as part of the origin and cause investigation. The Overall Fire Area (OFA) was identified as the burned vegetation and was approximately two acres. I started by walking along the heel of the fire and assessing fire pattern indicators from north to south and again from south to north. I traveled up an unmarked dirt road to the southern edge. I observed fire pattern indicator vectors consistent with a fire advancing from north to south. I observed a burned tractor with a rear attachment (later identified as a Kubota tractor with Gearmore Flail Shredder (GFS) implement) within the northwestern edge of the fire perimeter.

I entered the burned area from the unnamed dirt road in an area of predominately advancing fire pattern indicators. I traveled east to west and again from west to east. I observed fire pattern indicator vectors consistent with a fire advancing east of the Kubota tractor with GFS implement. I identified an area of approximately 100' by 100' surrounding the Kubota tractor with GFS implement as the General Origin Area (GOA). I asked fire suppression crews to temporarily avoid further mop-up to preserve fire pattern indicators and vectors for observation and photographs.

I visually inspected the Kubota tractor with GFS implement. The front of the Kubota was facing north. The Kubota and the GFS implement appeared structurally intact.

I began the visual inspection from the right (east-facing) side. I observed more damage to the Kubota than to the GFS. Fire effects and patterns were consistent with a fire that traveled from the front of the Kubota to the rear (north to south). I observed piles of debris near the rims consistent with tire material. The top 75 percent of the rims were visible, and the bottom 25 percent were covered by tire material. I observed what appeared to be molten metal within the exhaust stack. I was able to observe this because the opening of the exhaust stack was positioned low and near the ground, allowing the metal to settle at the bottom of the opening. I observed a metal cage that surrounded the exterior of the tractor.

I continued to the front (north-facing) of the Kubota. At the front of the Kubota, I observed oxidation and loss of the protective coating on the metal cage surrounding the engine area. There was more oxidation and coating loss on the metal cage's right side than on the left. The components within the caged area had extensive fire damage. A stream of molten metal appeared to have flowed from underneath the tractor, downhill, past the front of the tractor, and solidified.

I continued to the left (west-facing) side of the tractor. The observations on the left side of the tractor and tires were similar to the right. The fire effects and patterns were consistent with fire traveling from the front of the Kubota to the rear (north to south). I observed piles of debris near the rims consistent with tire material. The top 75 percent of the rims were visible, and the bottom 25 percent were covered by tire material.

I continued to the rear (south-facing) of the Kubota/GFS. I observed what appeared to be more paint loss on the north end of the GFS compared to the south. This is consistent with fire impacting the GFS from the north and progressing south. I observed what appeared to be melted plastic and fire debris near the gearbox on the top of the GFS. It appeared consistent with a cover that may have been over the input shaft for protection.

Visual inspection underneath the tractor and GFS implement was limited due to ground clearance.

SAQUI arrived at my location around approximately 7:10 PM. SAQUI confirmed the GOA around the tractor as approximately 100' by 100'. The macro indicators primarily consisted of the angle of char and protection. Due to limitations in visibility with the loss of daylight, the scene survey was suspended until the following day.

The GOA was marked with approximately three-inch red tape labeled "DANGER DO NOT ENTER."

SAQUI and I left the fire scene at approximately 8:00 PM. We briefly met with VENEGAS and scheduled an interview with VENEGAS and MORALES for October 31, 2024, at approximately 8:00 AM at Balcom Canyon Road and Bixby Road.

October 31, 2024

I contacted FCC at approximately 7:00 AM to request the use of a VCFD UAS operator. VCFD Fire Training Captain Sean AMECHE (Drone 11) was dispatched to the scene. I arrived in the area of Balcom Canyon Road and Bixby Road at approximately 7:15 AM. AMECHE arrived at approximately 7:45 AM.

SAQUI met with VENEGAS and MORALES at approximately 8:00 AM and escorted them to the fire scene to conduct an interview while I remained with AMECHE for the UAS flight.

I asked AMECHE to get overall photos and video documentation of the fire scene for our fire investigation. I assisted AMECHE with the areas we were requesting to be documented. Following the flight, requested by SAQUI and me, I left to assist in the interview SAQUI was conducting.

I arrived at SAQUI's location at approximately 8:35 AM. SAQUI was conducting the scheduled interview with VENEGAS and MORALES. I assisted SAQUI with the remainder of the interview (*Refer to SAQUI's Supplemental Report*).

Following the interview, VENEGAS and MORALES left the scene. SAQUI and I continued surveying the scene. We utilized red-colored flags to mark advancing fire pattern indicators and yellow-colored flags to mark lateral/flanking fire pattern indicators. Reading fire pattern indicators was limited due to fire suppression efforts and a lack of available vegetation.

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SAQUI and I determined the Specific Origin Area (SOA) was in the immediate area, including and surrounding the tractor. SAQUI and I left the tape placed the night before to keep the area marked for VENEGAS and his insurance. SAQUI and I completed our investigation and left the fire scene at approximately 10:30 AM.

INTERVIEWS:

Witness: Donny Lynch (D. LYNCH)

[REDACTED]

DOB: [REDACTED]

Phone Number: [REDACTED]

Parker Lynch (P. LYNCH)

[REDACTED]

DOB: [REDACTED]

Phone Number: [REDACTED]

October 30, 2024

SAQUI and I interviewed D. LYNCH by phone on the above date. The following is a summary of the conversation and is not meant to represent it in its entirety:

I notified D. LYNCH that we were going to be continuing our investigation tomorrow morning. D. LYNCH told us he would close and secure the gate that leads up to the area of the fire once all fire personnel have left.

I asked D. LYNCH if he was okay with us returning to the fire area tomorrow for further scene processing. D. LYNCH told us, "Of course". D. LYNCH stated the gate would be back open at 7:30 AM. D. LYNCH clarified he would not be in the area of the fire but would have "guys" at his property on Bixby.

I asked D. LYNCH if he is a lessee of the property and if he has spoken with the parcel owner. D. LYNCH told us he has not spoken with the parcel owner "yet". D. LYNCH stated he has talked with "the guy that leases all that property" and "sublet" to D. LYNCH (D. LYNCH identified the person as Michael "Mike" McCALISTER).

D. LYNCH provided contact information for the parcel owner (identified as Donald "Don" SCHIEFERLE) and the lessee (McCALISTER). D. LYNCH confirmed with us that McCALISTER leases from SCHIEFERLE. McCALISTER is whom D. LYNCH deals with. D. LYNCH told us anything that is on his "part of the lease", SAQUI and I could go on through D. LYNCH.

November 1, 2024

I interviewed D. LYNCH by phone on the above date. The following is a summary of the conversation and is not meant to represent it in its entirety:

D. LYNCH sent me photos he captured on October 30, 2024, of the fire.

D. LYNCH told me work has been ongoing in the area of the fire. D. LYNCH described the work as weed abatement and preparation for grazing cattle.

D. LYNCH told me he contracts with Venegas Farming to assist with the work. D. LYNCH has been doing work for them for "years," and the project within the fire area was started on Saturday. D. LYNCH stated they worked Saturday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. D. LYNCH told me those were the only days that Venegas Farming conducted work for him in that area; the rest of the area that had been cleared (to the west) was performed by D. LYNCH with his masticators.

I asked D. LYNCH what time VENEGAS called him on 10/30/2024. D. LYNCH told me VENEGAS called him to notify him of the fire at approximately 3:00 PM, from what he can recall. D. LYNCH stated he was only five to eight minutes away when he received the call from VENEGAS. D. LYNCH immediately called his son, P. LYNCH, who was at home in Somis. D. LYNCH initially told P. LYNCH he needed him to grab the water truck because he thought only the tractor was on fire.

As D. LYNCH was going up Bradley Road, he realized the situation might be something more than what VENEGAS originally thought after D. LYNCH saw a fire engine and the amount of smoke coming from the area of the fire. D. LYNCH called P. LYNCH and told him to "bring the dozer" instead. D. LYNCH believed he arrived at the fire scene between 3:10 PM and 3:14 PM after viewing his phone records. D. LYNCH stated he saw P. LYNCH "coming over the hill" with the dozer shortly after D. LYNCH got to the area of the fire.

D. LYNCH told me VENEGAS told him, "The tractor caught on fire," and "Jose had a fire extinguisher". D. LYNCH told me VENEGAS told him Jose (MORALES) used the fire extinguisher and went back to his truck to get another one, and by the time he (MORALES) got back, the tractor was "burnt up".

NOTE: During the course of the investigation, SAQUI and I discovered there was no fire extinguisher on the Kubota with GFS implement, and MORALES never used one (Refer to SAQUI's Supplemental Report).

D. LYNCH grabbed his shovel when he got to the fire, but there was too much fire to extinguish with a shovel.

D. LYNCH confirmed that neither he nor his son sustained any injuries during this incident. D. LYNCH told me that P. LYNCH has previous dozer training and certifications and has been to fires before through contract work.

I asked D. LYNCH if he had seen anyone on an all-terrain vehicle (ATV) while he was at the fire scene. D. LYNCH told me when he got up there, there was nobody at the fire scene.

NOTE: I observed what appeared to be an ATV on the ALERTCalifornia South Mountain East 1 camera in the area of the fire at approximately 3:01 PM. D. LYNCH told me he eventually saw someone on an ATV and a white pick-up truck and believed it may have been a neighbor down on Balcom Canyon Road. D. LYNCH did not recall the person's name or address. D. LYNCH described it as a red Honda "four-wheeler". He believed the individual may have come up to the area via Balcom Canyon Road.

D. LYNCH told me he has not seen anyone suspicious in the area of the fire and has had no other fires in the area. D. LYNCH told me he never gave that a thought because MORALES told him the "fire started right here with the tractor". D. LYNCH told me to "his knowledge" MORALES was the only person working up there at the time of the fire. D. LYNCH confirmed the water truck and dozer that I observed at the fire were his equipment but were not up there prior to the start of the fire.

October 30, 2024

Witness: Michael T. McCALISTER

DOB:

Phone Number:

SAQUI and I interviewed McCALISTER by phone on the above date. The following is a summary of the conversation and is not meant to represent it in its entirety:

I told McCALISTER I had been speaking with D. LYNCH. I asked McCALISTER if he knew who that was, and he responded, "Yes, Ma'am". McCALISTER told us he leases the property "below where the fire was". McCALISTER was not sure exactly where the fire was, but there is a section "up there" that he told D. LYNCH he could "use" because McCALISTER does not have a road that goes to it. He said it is a small section on top of the "cliffs".

McCALISTER told us he has an "arrangement" with D. LYNCH, allowing D. LYNCH to use it for "his cows". I reiterated for confirmation that he is leasing that area and has access. McCALISTER told us, "Yes", but to gain access, he has to go through D. LYNCH's property. We notified McCALISTER we would be continuing our investigation tomorrow morning and would be in contact with D. LYNCH for access.

Refer to SAQUI's Supplemental Report for the following interviews:

Guillermo VENEGAS Jr.

Jose A. MORALES ESQUIVEL

CAUSE DETERMINATION AND CONCLUSION:

The following opinion is based on my training, experience, physical evidence, and statements gathered throughout the totality of the investigation.

The use and negligent operation of the Kubota tractor with GFS implement resulted in the Balcom Fire.

This fire is classified as unintentional, as identified through the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS). The investigation revealed several violations of California Public Resource (PRC) and Health and Safety (H&S) Codes. The violations are as follows and further described earlier in the report: PRC4435 and H&S13000.

During my investigation, I considered other possible causes. While reviewing the ALERTCalifornia South Mountain East 1 camera, an ATV was observed near the area of the fire. MORALES denies seeing the ATV prior to the fire (*Refer to SAQUI's Supplemental Report*). I observed no evidence of an intentionally and/or maliciously set fire. Eyewitness statements were consistent with an unintentional fire.

Although the unmarked dirt road is accessible by ATVs and vehicles with 4X4 capability. MORALES reported seeing no other vehicles or individuals in the area while working. Witness statements from VENEGAS and D. LYNCH corroborated reports of no one else working in the area of the fire. I found no evidence substantiating an intentional or unintentional fire originating from the roadside. Fire pattern indicators and vectors were inconsistent with a fire originating from the roadside.

During my investigation on the ALERTCalifornia South Mountain East 1 camera, I observed what appeared to be smoke at approximately 2:54 PM. A call log provided to SAQUI from VENEGAS showed a dropped call from MORALES at 2:44 PM. MORALES called VENEGAS to report the Kubota was on fire (*Refer to SAQUI's Supplemental Report*).


MORALES was operating the Kubota tractor with GFS implement when he began to smell smoke. MORALES told SAQUI and me he had moved the tractor to an area he had already cleared of vegetation. MORALES told us there was no extinguisher on the Kubota tractor with GFS implement and did not use one during the incident. (*Refer to SAQUI's Supplemental Report*).

D. LYNCH told me he received a call from VENEGAS reporting a fire that had started in the area where he had been contracted to perform work. D. LYNCH told me the water truck and dozer I observed at the fire scene were his and brought up to the location after the start of the fire. D. LYNCH provided a photo from when he first arrived at the fire scene. The photo was consistent with the witness statement provided by MORALES and his observations of fire progression (*Refer to SAQUI's Supplemental Report*).

A search of Kubota Safety Notices and Recall Campaigns on the Kubota USA website (<https://www.kubotausa.com/service-support/safety/safety-notices>) and U.S. Consumer

Product Safety Commission website (<https://www.cpsc.gov/Recalls>) revealed no listed safety notices or recall campaigns for this Kubota model.

Barring new information, the specific causal factors of the Kubota tractor with GFS implement fire are undetermined. The competent ignition source is the use and negligent operation of the Kubota tractor with GFS implement within the dry vegetation. This includes but is not limited to a malfunction from mechanical, electrical, or vegetation coming directly in contact with heated components of the Kubota tractor with GFS implement. The first fuel ignited is undetermined. The event/s that brought the source and fuel together is undetermined. The use and negligent operation of the Kubota tractor with GFS implement resulted in a fire, which ultimately was exposed and spread to adjacent vegetation, consuming approximately 1.8 acres.



Signature Date 04/01/25

Andrea STANLEY

Fire Investigator Specialist

Ventura County Fire Department