

People rarely pay for starting fires in Northern Nevada

By Martha Bellisle, Reno Gazette-Journal

Fire officials are continuing their investigation into the cause of the Washoe Drive Fire, which burned 3,200 acres and 29 homes last month, but they have yet to decide whether to file charges against the man who admitted starting the blaze.

Although some fire-starters have served time in prison, officials have had little luck collecting funds from the people who ignited some of the area's wildland blazes, even though Nevada law allows fire districts to go after those responsible.

But if officials identify the man who admitted starting the Washoe Drive blaze, his neighbors may find some relief through his insurance company, a Reno lawyer said.

One man who started a 2007 blaze continues to serve time in prison but has paid little of the restitution he was ordered to pay. Another man responsible for a large Reno fire settled the lawsuits filed against him for less than \$1 million, and has since filed for bankruptcy.

The Washoe Fire first broke out in an area off Washoe Drive and U.S. 395 about noon on Jan. 19. High winds ahead of a winter storm quickly spread the blaze in different directions, forcing about 10,000 people to evacuate.

An elderly man, who has not been identified, contacted officials late in the afternoon to report that he had started the blaze by disposing fireplace ashes improperly. Fire Marshal Joan Presley has declined to say whether they'll seek

charges, and only said the blaze is under investigation.

The estimated cost of the Washoe Drive Fire has yet to be calculated, but the Caughlin Fire in November burned 1,935 acres and caused more than \$7.6 million in property damage, according to a new report.

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