

Point of origin hard to trace

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Littered with beer cans and other debris from homeless camps, the scorched area in Ashland where a devastating fire started Aug. 24 is recognizable only with a trained eye.

On Tuesday, Margueritte Hickman, fire marshal for Ashland Fire & Rescue, trudged through the ash and dirt that was formerly covered with blackberry bushes and oak trees off Washington Street.

She pointed to a tiny tree stump wrapped with yellow police tape that is the general area where the Oak Knoll fire started, before it raced across 4 acres of dry grass, jumped Interstate 5 and burned 11 houses.

"We try to piece together eyewitness statements and the evidence on the ground," she said. "I guess I would say there isn't anything that I would describe as an 'aha.' "

What evidence exists won't be revealed yet because Ashland police are building a case against 40-year-old John David Thiry, who has been charged with 10 counts of reckless endangering and 14 counts of reckless burning. All of the charges are misdemeanor crimes, each punishable by a maximum of one year in jail.

Ashland Police Chief Terry Holderness said while the fire was human-caused, so far the evidence doesn't point to the suspect intentionally trying to set the field on fire, which would be considered arson, a felony. If someone had been injured in the fire, the suspect also would have faced felony charges, he said.

Holderness said that, hypothetically, someone could light a match to a blade of grass but not have the intention of burning a field. In that case, the incident wouldn't be considered arson.

As the investigation continues to unfold, Holderness said, new evidence could lead to a different conclusion.

"It's always possible that we might come up with other evidence that would point to arson," he said.

The exact point of origin of the fire is difficult to determine, but Hickman said she and four other investigators have narrowed it down to an area about 10-foot by 10-foot, now covered in bottles, cans, some kind of metal frame and other debris.

While the blaze moved in a southeasterly direction, the area where the fire started is about 200 feet south of where the scorched ground is first evident.

Hickman explained that is a phenomenon known as a backburn, where a smaller fire creeps

away from the general direction of the main blaze.

Hickman said four other fire investigators -- many with expertise in wildland fires -- came from the U.S. Forest Service, Fire District No. 3 and the Oregon Department of Forestry.

"We wanted to have different sets of eyes looking at things in a different way," she said.

One day after the fire, with temperatures topping 100 degrees, investigators spent hours studying the terrain and burn patterns and collecting any evidence. They will now spend about three or four days writing up reports and doing follow-up interviews to describe what they discovered.

Hickman wouldn't confirm if any evidence was collected, but said if it was, it would be sent to a lab for processing.

Hickman said that contrary to what some might think, the source of a fire is not necessarily destroyed by the fire itself. But even if a source is found, the investigative process takes time and is a compilation of lots of evidence and interviews.

"It's not magic," Hickman said. "It's challenging."