

Arson fire damages Ford dealership

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Authorities unsure if incident is linked to spate of torched cars

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SANTA CRUZ — An early-morning fire that destroyed an office and five new trucks at North Bay Ford Lincoln Mercury was the work of an arsonist, fire investigators say.

A small office at the dealership's 1999 Soquel Ave. lot was engulfed in flames when firefighters arrived at 3:15 a.m., said Santa Cruz Deputy Fire Marshal Ray Zachau. Three Ford

F150s and two Ford Explorers were also ablaze.

Firefighters used foam to extinguish the flames. Zachau estimated damages to the vehicles and building at \$135,000.

Investigators suspected arson almost immediately. An accelerant was found at the scene, Zachau said. The case was turned over to Santa Cruz police, who said they have no suspects.

"This is huge," said police Sgt. Kevin Vogel, who called the blaze the biggest confirmed arson in the city in several years.

North Bay Ford owner Bill Winterhalder said he had no idea who would target his business. He said the business had not received any threats.

Winterhalder said he was insured for the loss, and the lot remained open Wednesday.

The Wednesday fire was seen by a passing motorist who called 911 on a cellular phone, Vogel said. The driver grabbed a fire extinguisher from his truck and tried unsuccessfully

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Santa Cruz firefighters look for evidence at North Bay Ford on Wednesday.

Fire

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to fight the fire himself.

Vogel said he did not know what type of accelerant, how much was used or whether the building or the trucks were targeted. On Wednesday afternoon, investigators were starting to interview employees to see if they know of any disgruntled ex-employees or customers.

The fire follows a string of car arsons that date to September. Since then, someone or a group of people has stolen and torched at least 15 and possibly as many as 21 cars from city streets.

Vogel said it was too early to determine if the North Bay Ford blaze was the work of the same arsonist.

And there are differences in the cases, he added. The Wednesday fire also involved a building, while the other incidents involved only vehicles, he said.

Also, all the previous incidents involved imports, while this one targeted American-made vehicles.

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