

Another marijuana grower suspected of starting California wildfire

By Sam Stanton

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A 45-year-old man suspected of tending a large marijuana grow in the Sequoia National Forest is being charged with starting a 1,600-acre wildfire there July 11, the second suspected marijuana grower believed to have sparked a major blaze this year.

Edgardo Fournier of Perris was indicted Thursday by a federal grand jury in Fresno on five counts that include marijuana cultivation of 2,090 plants, damaging forestlands and setting timber afire.

According to an arrest warrant affidavit filed in U.S. District Court, Fournier set the Nicolls fire after he became concerned that other men at the marijuana grow he was tending planned to kill him and bury him at the site.

The affidavit from U.S. Forest Service special agent Brian Adams says Fournier was spotted at 2 p.m. the day of the fire by a Forest Service helicopter pilot who was making water drops on the blaze.

Pilot Matt Villanueva said he saw a man with no shirt on at the edge of the fire “waving his arms and running around,” the affidavit says. The man had a cellphone in one hand and appeared to be trying to get Villanueva to land the helicopter “in a very unsafe area,” the affidavit says.

At the time, the fire was about 100 acres in size and the pilot reported what he saw, leading investigators to begin searching for the man.

The next night, the Kern County Sheriff’s Office got a call from a couple in the small town of Onyx reporting that a disheveled man with no shirt had asked them for help and said he had been lost in the desert for two days.

Adams said he went to the area and found Fournier, then took him to a substation for an interview.

According to Adams’ affidavit, Fournier said he had been hired to tend to about 900 plants at the marijuana grow but had begun to worry in the past week about others at the site.

“He felt they wanted to get rid of him, so they did not have to pay him,” Adams wrote. “He said the other subjects dug a big hole at the site and he knew they were going to kill him and bury him there, so he grabbed a few items and walked away from the grow site.”

Fournier told Adams he heard the men chasing him and, after running for a mile, he “started to light fires with a cigarette lighter in an attempt to stop them from chasing him,” the affidavit states.

The Nicolls fire ballooned to 1,680 acres before being contained. Damages are expected to range into the millions of dollars, authorities say.

Fournier is the second man accused of causing a major fire this year associated with a marijuana grow.

Authorities have blamed Sacramento resident Freddie Alexander Smoke III, 37, for starting the Bully fire in Shasta County the same day the Nicolls fire erupted.

Authorities say Smoke sparked the blaze when he drove a large rental truck into a marijuana grow site and its exhaust ignited dry grass.

That fire has burned 12,661 acres and is 95 percent contained. It is blamed for burning 21 structures, and authorities are investigating the subsequent discovery of a body inside the fire zone.