



BUTTE COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY



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PRESS RELEASE

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Chico Man Convicted of Arson for Causing 2024 Park Fire

The Park Fire arson suspect was found guilty as charged by a Butte County Superior Court judge after a three-day court trial that concluded today, the second anniversary of California's fourth-largest wildfire. The suspect had previously waived his right to a trial by jury, opting to be tried by a judge.

Ronnie Dean Stout, 44, of Chico, faces 25 years to life for causing the fire and will be sentenced on October 9, 2026, at 8:30 a.m. in the Butte County Superior Court in Oroville.

Butte County Superior Court Judge Kristen Lucena announced her verdict this morning, following final arguments by the prosecutor and defense attorney. In her decision, the judge stated she believed the testimony of a young woman who said she saw Stout push his flaming car into a gully in upper Bidwell Park, which then caused the 429,603-acre Park Fire on July 24, 2024.

Judge Lucena also found true a special allegation that Stout caused multiple residential structures to be destroyed in the fire and that Stout had previously been convicted of two "strikes" – a child molestation offense and a robbery – that made him subject to California's three-strike law.

Supervising Deputy District Attorney Marc Noel called several witnesses during the trial who painted a picture of a drunk and angry Stout who had been seen harassing bathers earlier in the day at the Bear Hole swimming area in the upper park. Witnesses testified that they saw Stout drive his 2007 Toyota Yaris speeding and recklessly down the dirt and gravel Upper Park Road back toward Chico.

Near another swimming area known as Alligator Hole, Stout's vehicle slid off the road and over a dirt berm 60 feet above a gully near Big Chico Creek. After becoming high-centered on the berm, Stout attempted to extricate his car by alternating between forward and reverse. Witnesses testified they watched from the entrance to Alligator Hole as Stout revved his engine and his tires spun in high grass and brush near the berm. They also testified they immediately recognized that Stout was going to start a fire.

Noel introduced evidence that July 24, 2024, was a "Red Flag" day, with temperatures in the Chico area exceeding 100 degrees and a strong, hot, dry wind blowing from the south. In addition, the average high temperature for the preceding 20 days was over 100 degrees, and on 10 of those days the high temperatures had exceeded 105 degrees. As a result, the grass and brush in Upper Bidwell Park were extremely susceptible to a major fire if ignited.

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A fire did start under Stout's Toyota. The lead arson investigator for CalFire, Battalion Chief Matt Palade, testified that his investigation of the scene showed the heat from the vehicle ignited the dry grass and brush under the car.

Another witness testified that she was walking on the Yahi Trail from Alligator Hole toward Bear Hole when she became aware of the vehicle and fire. She further testified that she saw Stout get out of the vehicle and intentionally push it over the embankment. The vehicle rolled 60 feet down the embankment and ignited dry vegetation at the bottom. CalFire crews found the Toyota Yaris at the bottom of the embankment.

Witnesses at the entrance to Alligator Hole and the witness on the Yahi Trail testified that they immediately called 911 to report the fire and began warning others in the Alligator Hole area. The witness on the Yahi Trail further testified that as she was helping people evacuate from Alligator Hole, she observed the person who had pushed the vehicle over the embankment step out of the bush on the north side of the Yahi Trail and blend into a group of people evacuating from Alligator Hole. This witness used her cell phone to take several photographs of the subject as he walked westbound on the Yahi Trail away from Alligator Hole.

After escaping from Upper Bidwell Park, the witness who had observed Stout pushing the vehicle over the embankment posted the photographs she had taken of Stout walking on the Yahi Trail after starting the fire on social media. Multiple other witnesses from Alligator Hole and Bear Hole saw the photographs on social media, recognized Stout, and contacted CalFire. The witness also provided the photographs to Investigator Palade.

Palade testified that approximately three hours after the fire ignited, he contacted Stout by phone and attempted to interview him. During the call, Stout repeatedly asked Palade, "What did I do wrong, bro?" Stout was later arrested at his mother's home in Chico.

During his final argument to the judge, the trial prosecutor Noel projected Stout's repeated question, "What did I do wrong, bro," onto a large courtroom screen and answered it point by point – recklessly and drunkenly speeding down a dirt and gravel road; sliding off that road; high-centering on a dirt berm in the middle of high grass and brush on a hot, wind-red-flag day; spinning and sparking his wheels there; and finally, in a fit of anger, pushing the flaming car over the edge into the vegetation-filled gully.

Noel also showed the judge a computer-generated three-dimensional crime scene diagram and map produced by the Chico Police drone unit. In the diagram, Stout's car was depicted at the bottom of the gully, and Noel noted testimony that the Toyota Yaris's manual transmission was in neutral and that the vehicle's parking (emergency) brake was not engaged.

As part of the evidence, Noel had the judge review an 826-page Damage Assessment Report prepared by a CalFire Damage Assessment Team. The report determined that 427 homes in Butte and Tehama Counties were destroyed by the fire.

Butte County District Attorney Mike Ramsey noted that at Stout's October sentencing, his office will present "victim impact statements" to the judge from residents of Butte, Tehama, and Shasta Counties who suffered damage, evacuation, or trauma from the fire.

Ramsey invited those victims to submit their victim impact statements to his office by emailing those statements to: parkfireimpact@buttecounty.ca.gov



Ronnie Stout