

Media Advisory – May 26, 2009

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Arson dog joins county fire marshal's office *Labrador can sniff out accelerants used in arsons, other fires*

The Snohomish County Fire Marshal's Office is one of two agencies in Western Washington to have a certified arson dog on staff.

Named Topper, the two-year-old Labrador recently joined the Snohomish County Fire Marshal's Office through a State Farm Insurance grant. The dog has been trained to sniff out accelerants often used to deliberately set fires.

Snohomish County applied for a grant through the national Arson Dog Program, which has been sponsored by State Farm since 1993. There are about 250 certified arson dogs in the nation.

Upon receipt last month of a \$25,000 grant that covers training for the dog and handler, Deputy Fire Marshal Mikael Makela traveled to Maine to work with the dog. Topper will be used for two primary functions: to sniff out accelerants used at fires and to be part of an ongoing educational campaign against arson.

"This is an efficient way to increase our ability to track potential arson cases and hopefully limit that number in years to come," said Snohomish County Executive Aaron Reardon.

The Snohomish County Fire Marshal's Office, which is under the county's Executive Office, investigated 66 set fires in 2008, resulting in nearly \$10 million in damages. Snohomish County saw an increase in arson related cases in 2008, accounting for almost 30 percent of total investigations. Residential and vehicle arsons are typically two of the top five fire causes in Snohomish County.

Nationwide, arson causes more than \$2 billion in annual property losses. More than 700 arsons in the United States are started each month by people under 18 years of age, accounting for roughly 54 percent of all arsons nationwide.

"Topper will allow us to cut down on time spent to investigate arson fires as well as the number of samples we send to the state crime lab for testing," said Mike McCrary, the county's fire marshal. "That allows us to determine the cause faster, and in the case of arson, to capture the culprit quicker."

With only three arson-certified dogs in the state, Snohomish County expects to help other fire investigators in the region with potential arson cases, McCrary said. The federal

Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives has an arson dog in the Seattle area and another near Yakima.

The cost to the county for Topper's care is minimal. The Fire Marshal's Office is working with local nonprofits and pet stores such as Pennies for Puppies and Petco to pick up veterinary costs and other items.

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