



BUTTE COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY



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PRESS RELEASE

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Dump Truck Driver Pleads Guilty in 2019 Vehicular Deaths

An Antioch man pleaded guilty today to two counts of felony gross vehicular manslaughter in Butte County Superior Court. The charges were the result of a four-vehicle collision occurring June 21, 2019, that left two people dead and four others seriously injured on Highway 99 in Butte County.

Thomas Fairhurst, 57, of Antioch, was driving a 26,000-pound 2011 Volvo dump truck northbound on Highway 99, as he approached the red light at Neal Road south of Chico. Fairhurst was driving at 55 mph when he collided into the rear of a Chevrolet Aveo that was stopped at the red light. There was no evidence of braking by Fairhurst before the impact. Fairhurst's dump truck, which struck the Chevrolet from behind, pushed the Chevrolet into a Toyota Sienna that had also been stopped at the red light. The Toyota was then, in turn, pushed into and under a semi-truck that had also been stopped in front of the Toyota. Both the Chevrolet and Toyota sustained extensive damage.

Donald Shippen, 53, of Chico, and his wife, Apryl Shippen, 56, both passengers in the Chevrolet, were pronounced deceased at the scene as a result of the collision. Their adult son, the driver of the Chevrolet, sustained major injuries and was transported to Enloe Hospital.

All three occupants of the Toyota also suffered major injuries and were transported to Enloe Hospital. Fairhurst and the semi-truck driver were not injured.

Butte County District Attorney Mike Ramsey said an investigation by the California Highway Patrol Major Accident Investigation Team revealed Fairhurst had engaged in late-night partying and activities in the days leading up to the collision. Investigators concluded this resulted in Fairhurst not obtaining the amount of sleep needed to operate his commercial vehicle safely and attentively and that he fell asleep as he approached the busy intersection.

Ramsey said Fairhurst's case was one of many serious cases on the Butte County docket delayed repeatedly during the COVID pandemic. Fairhurst will next appear in Butte County Superior Court on April 21, 2023, for sentencing. He remains out of custody on his own recognizance. He faces up to seven years and four months in state prison.