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PRESS RELEASE

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Oroville Serial Arsonist Sentenced to 15 Years State Prison

An Oroville man was sentenced to state prison today for setting a series of wildland fires in September of 2019. Jeremy Gendreau, age 37, was sentenced to an aggregate term of 15 years in state prison today, after previously pleading guilty to multiple counts of arson. Gendreau had pleaded guilty to a series of fires he set in Butte County from September 8, 2019 to September 27, 2019. His plea additionally included an admission that the fires were committed during a proclaimed state of emergency due to the fire season.

District Attorney Mike Ramsey said that on September 8, 2019, Cal Fire responded to a vegetation/wildland fire in the Mt. Ida community in the East Oroville area of Butte County. The fire was approximately 30 feet off the roadway and burned about one acre. It was named the Flat Fire. Luckily, there were firefighting resources already deployed to the nearby Swedes Fire, and Cal Fire was able to quickly respond and contain the blaze. Cal Fire noted there was no apparent logical reason for the fire to start in that area and launched an arson investigation.

During the investigation, a witness provided a description of a bald white male with a narrow face in his mid-30s to mid-40s driving a sage green metallic minivan with a California license plate. The witness had written down the license number of the minivan after it had been spotted driving in a suspicious manner in the area before and after the ignition of the Flat Fire.

On September 27, 2019, two additional suspicious vegetation/wildland fires were reported on Oregon Gulch Road in the East Oroville area of Butte County. At the time the fires were reported, the previously described Mt. Ida minivan was found backed into a clearing on the side of the road next to the covered bridge on Oregon Gulch Road. Upon further investigation, Cal Fire arson investigators found that a total of five fires had been ignited. Each of those ignitions were at the bottom of a slope, and threatened nearby inhabited structures. A witness identified Gendreau as the sole occupant and driver of the minivan, and said Gendreau left the area of the fires in the minivan.

Cal Fire investigators identified Gendreau as a possible suspect and placed him under surveillance. After conducting further investigation, Gendreau was subsequently arrested by Cal Fire arson investigators on October 1, 2019, while he was driving the same minivan on his way to work. A pen-type butane torch lighter was found in the minivan. Gendreau remained in custody at the Butte County Jail from the date of his arrest. COVID-19 restrictions delayed his plea and sentencing for well over a year.

Ramsey said, "In the wake of several devastating wildfires, Mr. Gendreau's actions seriously endangered the residents and first responders of Butte County. I applaud Cal Fire investigators for

vigorously investigating this case. I also want to thank the citizen witnesses who came forward with information, which ultimately assisted in solving this series of arsons. Alert witness observations often provide critical investigative leads in crimes of this nature.”

As part of his sentencing today, Gendreau was found to be in violation of two prior grants of formal felony probation for theft, vandalism and narcotics which lead to his total aggregate sentence to state prison of 15 years. It was also ordered to register as an arson offender once a year for the rest of his life after he does his prison term.

