

International Association of Arson Investigators

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Hawaii Chapter Newsletter



About eight Hawaii Chapter members are attending the International conference in Denver this week. I am sure it will be another valuable opportunity to share ideas and learn from each other in accomplishing our common goals.

Next year, the International conference will be held in Dallas at about the same time. Plan ahead and I am sure you won't regret it. Some of the best training occurs there.

After the Denver conference, the Hawaii chapter board will be meeting to finalize our annual training class scheduled for October 2008. Stay tuned for the details.

Arson Awareness week is May 4-10, 2008. You may get more information online by going to various websites out there. There is

a big push to ban lighters that resemble toys. I am sure you have seen them near registers at many stores. Young children don't know any better because it looks like something they can play with. Spread the word and do not purchase any lighters that can easily be mistaken for a toy.

Also, if you can't find your lighter or matches, ask your kids, they'll tell you where it is.

Aloha,
Val Martin
President

Can Vehicle Catalytic Converters Start Brush Fires ?

By Val Martin

In February of this year, a fire call came in to the Maui Fire Department that stated multiple brush fires are occurring along Kahekili Hwy near Wailuku. I heard the call on my department radio and could imagine that it was some kids throwing fireworks out of a moving

vehicle or something similar. We have had these types of calls before but it usually happens within a few weeks after we have our retail sales of fireworks, generally New Years and 4th of July. Lt. Scott English of our Fire Prevention Bureau was nearby

and also responded to the scene with two fire engines and 1 water tanker. The area had heavy rains for almost two weeks and it was pretty green. We also knew that the fire would not get way and increase since it was separated by roadways on all sides. As expected,

the three separate fires were small and did not get larger than a few feet across in diameter. As Lt. English approached the scene, he found it interesting that the fires were not only small, but that it was mostly evenly circular in pattern. Being that the vegetation was green, it burned slow and pre-heated the vegetation as it increased in size.

The fires occurred in the morning so the winds were light and did not affect the burning pattern much in any particular direction. While going through the burnt area along the roadway, he expected to find remains of fireworks or something similar that could start the fire. He did not find anything right away but was persistent and continued to look since it was a small area and the answer had to be right in front of him.

He came across a piece of ceramic near the center of the fire. After examining it, he could see that it had a honeycomb texture. He immediately knew what it was. Lt. English was a mechanic before joining the fire department and had

no doubt it was from a catalytic converter. All the fires occurred within one foot of the white line that divides the driving lane and the shoulder of the Hwy. It was not consistent with someone tossing something from a moving car. If that were the case, the fires would have started 5-15 feet from the roadway or farther.

Our hypothesis is that it came from a side muffler as it was climbing the incline on their way to Wailuku. The area has homes that are serviced by private dirt roadways with holes and divots. It is easily conceivable that the catalytic converter could be damaged by bottoming out on the roadway and cracking the ceramic contents inside the catalytic converter. We believe that fires can be caused by cracked catalytic converters in automobiles.

In Appendix II-A, the 1997 Uniform Fire Code (current code) requires a minimum of 10 feet clearance of brush from all roadways used by the public. The brush can be no more than 18" high within the 10 feet.

If you are familiar with Maui, you know that Haleakala Hwy has a consistent incline as you leave Hana

Hwy. It is about a 5-6 mile drive to Pukalani that is lined with sugar cane fields. Large semi trucks go up the hill daily that have vertical exhaust pipes venting above the cab. Could these exhaust pipes be responsible for starting unscheduled burning of the cane fields? We have had a series of fires in this area over the years and it costs the fire dept and sugar company lots of money to fight these fires. Are all of these fires incendiary? Arson?

CFI Ruben Dadez of the Maui Police Dept once inquired about the safety checks conducted on these large trucks. He concluded that it may be a good idea for the State agency responsible for inspecting these trucks to also include inspections of the catalytic converters if they are equipped with one. The main goal is to check to make sure they are not cracked or contain small, hot pieces that would emit to the outside.

Articles are that of the writer and are not necessarily the opinions of the IAAI or the Hawaii Chapter of the IAAI.

Chapter Membership Information

On the front page you will see the officers contact information. Please feel free to contact any of us with any questions or concerns you may have during the year. I would like to keep this newsletter active so I will need your support. My goal

is to keep all members up to date with what is happening in our chapter. Please send us your current information, i.e. phone numbers, email address, and mailing address so we may keep an up to date list of our members. Please send let me know if

you have any articles that you would like to include on a future newsletter.



Wear proper protective clothing & safety equipment when investigating fire