



# The Lakeside Leader

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## Arson the likely cause of Slave Lake fire

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By process of elimination, investigators have determined the cause of the fire that destroyed parts of Poplar Lane and Slave Lake last May was arson. As explained by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development Minister Frank Oberle at a Nov. 1 news conference, that means it was deliberately set.

"It was not acciden-

tal," Oberle said, in response to a question from the press gallery. "Campfires, garbage burning – we would not classify those as arson."

Oberle started his remarks by clarifying the context. About half the wildfires in the province are 'man-caused,' he said, but the great majority of those are "usually by carelessness or accident.

"This was arson."

Oberle said SRD in-

vestigators had been over every other possibility, and did not come to their judgment lightly. He called the conclusion of arson, "extremely disappointing," adding that it only exacerbates what people who lost property have had to go through.

Also in response to a question from a reporter, Oberle said "absolutely we do," know the ignition point of Fire #65, which ended up destroying nearly 400

structures in Slave Lake and Poplar Lane.

"But I'm not going to point it out on a map. It's a crime scene."

Not that the general area it started is exactly a secret. Many people have visited the site, which can be fairly easily deduced by considering the wind direction on the day in question. Orange tape and blue flags give some indication as well.

The exact ignition

point – if in fact it was one point and not two or more – isn't that obvious. Some people remain convinced there was a tree blown over a power line that sparked a fire on May 14 in that same vicinity. Notwithstanding that belief, last week's announcement appears to rule out accident as a cause of the fire, leaving much to still be explained.

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# Arson

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Whatever story the scene told to SRD forensic investigators in the days following the fire, the information is now in the hands of police. Presumably they'll be focusing their efforts on finding out who might have been in the area on the afternoon of May 14, 2011.

Oberle's remarks on the finding of arson were more or less reiterated by Slave Lake RCMP Staff Sgt. Roberta McKale and Slave Lake Mayor Karina Pillay-Kinnee for the TV cameras later the same day. They expressed confidence in the RCMP, who took over the investigation from SRD last week. McKale said the local detachment would not be involved in the investigation. She said five of the detachment officers (not 11 as reported elsewhere) lost their homes, along with two auxiliary constables and four other employees.

Fire #65, which came to be known as the Slave Lake Fire, started in the late afternoon of May 14, 2011, at a point south

and east of the Poplar Lane neighbourhood, roughly eight kilometres east of Slave Lake. The wind was high that after-

noon and evening, and the fire spread quickly, jumping the West Mitsue access road and moving through the

country residential area to the west and north-west. It destroyed four homes that night.

The next afternoon

the wind grew even worse, and the fire roared across the intervening landscape, entering Slave Lake about 24

hours after it started. Deliberately set – if the investigators are correct – by an unknown person or persons.



**Scene of the crime?**

Blue flags and orange ribbons in the vicinity of the Fire #65 ignition site, as it appeared last week.