

Smokey's Wildfire Prevention Detectives

Activity 2 Reproducible Master

Arson or Accident?

More than 75,000 wildfires are reported to the National Interagency Fire Center (www.nifc.gov) each year. Some are caused by lightning, and in some parts of the West, lightning is the main cause of wildfires. Nationwide, however, nine out of ten wildfires are caused by people. Usually, the cause is careless behavior like unattended campfires, misuse of matches and fireworks, discarded cigarettes, burning leaves and yard debris on dry, windy days, and sparks from vehicles and equipment. Unfortunately, some people set wildfires deliberately. These are called *arson fires*.

ASSIGNMENT: Weigh the Evidence

You need evidence to determine the cause of a wildfire. Imagine that you are the Wildfire Detective assigned to investigate a campsite that is believed to be the point of origin of a recent wildfire. It's your job to decide if the wildfire was arson or an accident.

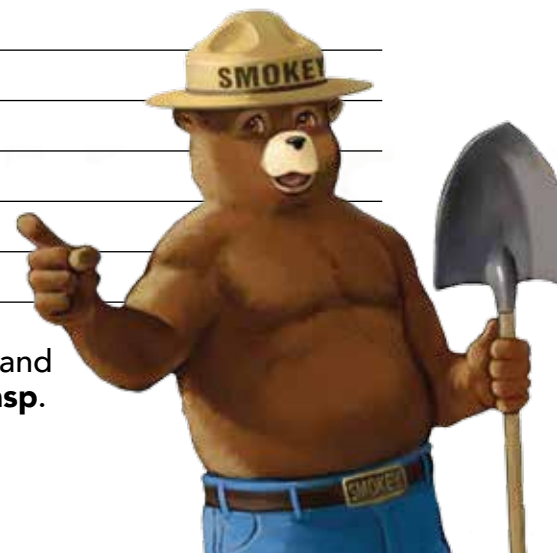
When you arrive on the scene, you don't detect the smell of gasoline or any other accelerant that might have been used to start the fire, and you don't see any "pour patterns" on the ground that would have been left by a burning liquid. You do see many signs of human activity — footprints, at least two different sets of tire tracks, remains of exploded fireworks, and several discarded cigarettes. You also notice the remains of a campfire. Carefully, stirring the ashes, you uncover some glowing embers; when you blow on them, flames are produced.

The firefighters who put out the wildfire tell you that the smoke was not black, and you know that black smoke is usually a sign of burning gasoline or some other accelerant. They also tell you that the fire was reported by a witness who says he saw a group of young people driving in the direction of the campsite earlier in the day. To finish up your investigation, you contact the local power company to find out if there are any reports of downed lines in the area, and check with the local weather service for reports of lightning strikes in the area. Negative on both counts.

Now use this checklist to summarize the evidence you've gathered.

Investigator's Checklist	Yes	No
1. Are there tire tracks or footprints near the fire scene?		
2. Are there matches at the fire scene?		
3. Are there any discarded cigarettes at the fire scene?		
4. Are there any fireworks at the fire scene?		
5. Did witnesses observe anyone near the fire scene?		
6. Did witnesses observe black smoke at the fire scene?		
7. Is there any smell of gasoline or other accelerants at the fire scene?		
8. Are there liquid pour patterns at the fire scene?		
9. Are there any reports of lightning strikes in the area?		
10. Are there any reports of downed power lines in the area?		

Based on the evidence, what do you think was the cause of the fire and why?



To find out more about how you and your family can prevent wildfires and be safe outdoors, go to www.SmokeyBear.com/be-smart-outdoors.asp.