

# THE YEAR IN PUBLIC SAFETY

A devastating wildfire, meth-dealing cops and a former principal charged with murder

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**T**he most notable breaking news stories of the year are often a variation on a regular, almost expected theme.

Grisly homicides, tragic drunken driving crashes and, yes, wildfires, make the list.

But this past summer's deadly Erskine Fire achieved a grim benchmark: It quickly developed into the most devastating conflagration in Kern County history.

LOOKING BACK AT

2016

As such, it leads this year's tally of noteworthy crime and disaster stories, taking its place alongside crooked cops, alleged child killers and a wave of shootings that swept through the Bakersfield area.

## DEADLY, DAMAGING WILDFIRE IN LAKE ISABELLA AREA

Shortly after it was reported the afternoon of June 23, it became apparent a two-acre blaze originating near Erskine Creek Road and Apollo Way in the Lake Isabella area was going to chew up some acreage. Still, the speed at which it progressed proved shocking even to those who have grown accustomed to wildfires in the area.

Hot weather, 40-mile-per-hour winds, drought conditions and low fuel moisture combined for the perfect conditions in which a wildfire could flourish, sending the blaze roaring across thousands of acres in a matter of hours. An estimated 80 structures burned that evening into the following day.

Firefighters scrambled into action and called in resources from across the state, but the blaze continued to march across the county. Social media was flooded with questions asking about containment, the safety of friends and family and what could be done to help.

By the time it was contained 18 days later, it had burned nearly 50,000 acres, destroyed 309 homes and killed two people who tried to flee their home but were overcome by smoke.

Thousands left their homes only to return to scorched piles of debris. Some communities were almost entirely destroyed, and fundraisers continue to be held to benefit victims of the fire.

Before it was even contained the blaze had already been named the most devastating fire



CASEY CHRISTIE / THE CALIFORNIAN

Firefighters battle last summer's Erskine Fire by lighting backfires in Lake Isabella. Shortly after it was reported on June 23, it became apparent a two-acre blaze originating near Erskine Creek Road and Apollo Way in the Lake Isabella area was going to chew up some acreage.

in Kern County history, and is ranked 15th out of the 20 most damaging fires in California history.

In December, Kern County firefighters revealed the blaze was caused by a power line that wore down over time as it rubbed against a tree. The investigation has now been turned over to the Bureau of Land Management, which will decide whether civil penalties or criminal charges will be sought.

According to a news release sent out by Bakersfield-based attorneys Clifford & Brown, the fire started on land owned by the Bureau of Land Management that contains an archery facility, called Kern River Archers. That group, the release said, leases the facility from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, which in turn leases the land from BLM.

Several attorneys based outside of Kern County said they are representing families impacted by the fire and have filed claims against the Department of Fish and Wildlife on their behalf.

## TWO COPS SENTENCED FOR DEALING METHAMPHETAMINE

The sentencing of former Bakersfield police detectives Damacio Diaz and Patrick Mara drew criticism as being too lenient for men who, having sworn to uphold the law, instead stole methamphetamine and put it back on the streets, pocketing thousands of dollars.

Both men could have received prison terms upward of 20 years, but U.S. District Judge Lawrence O'Neill instead sentenced each to five years.

Both men admitted to using their positions as police officers to steal meth from drug dealers and sell it through a third party for personal gain. The U.S. Attorney's Office had recommended sentences of 21 to 27 years for Mara and 17 to 22 years for Diaz.

Local prosecutors and a number of residents who wrote to The Californian said the detectives got off easy, and a civil rights attorney representing the families of several men shot and killed by Bakersfield police called for a federal



HENRY A. BARRIOS / THE CALIFORNIAN

Former Bakersfield Police Department Detective Damacio Diaz with his wife, Courtney, and other family members are seen leaving U.S. District Court in Fresno after Diaz was sentenced Oct. 3 to five years in federal prison.

takeover of the BPD.

Bakersfield Police Chief Greg Williamson held a press conference following the detectives' sentencings in October

to reassure the public Diaz, 44, and Mara, 36, acted alone. The detectives claimed widespread

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## PUBLIC SAFETY

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related issues. The investigation will be civil, not criminal.

Kern County Sheriff Donny Youngblood has said his agency will willingly cooperate.

"We believe we're following the law," he said.

BPD Chief Lyle Martin will meet with the California Department of Justice in January to get details on how the investigation will progress, and will share them with the public, a police news release said.

### EX-NFL PLAYER HANGED HIMSELF AFTER KERN COUNTY HEARING

The troubled life of talented athlete Lawrence Phillips, once a college star at Nebraska before using up second, third and more chances in the NFL, came to an end in a prison cell in Kern County.

Phillips, 40, hanged himself at Kern Valley State Prison late Jan. 12. A note taped to his chest read "Do Not Resuscitate."

Phillips was last seen alive at 11:35 p.m. by correctional officers during a routine security check of his cell, according to autopsy reports. He was found unresponsive a half hour later during another check.

Prison staff began CPR, and Phillips was rushed to Delano Regional Medical Center. He was pronounced dead at 1:26 a.m.

Phillips was serving a sentence of 31 years and four months for separate convictions of running down three teens following a pickup football game in 2005, and choking his roommate.

He continued to find trouble in prison. Prosecutors charged Phillips with first-degree murder in the strangulation death of cellmate Damion Dewayne Soward on April 11, 2015.

Phillips' suicide came the day after a judge found there was enough evidence to try him in Soward's death. He became upset during the hearing, cursing at an officer who testified to Phillips' prior crimes.

A standout college player at Nebraska, Phillips was drafted sixth overall in the 1996 NFL draft by the St. Louis Rams despite troubling off-field incidents including assaulting an ex-girlfriend. He remained unable to stay out of trouble and was released by the Rams in 1997.

Brief stints with the Miami Dolphins, NFL Europe and San Francisco 49ers followed, as did legal issues.

### OILDALE GUNMAN TRIGGERED STANDOFF AFTER DOUBLE HOMICIDE

An Oildale gunman sparked a seven-hour standoff July 22 after killing an uncle and a family friend.

Unbeknownst to law enforcement, Christopher Dale Gray had already left the area after shooting Michael Kennedy, 58, and Ricky Dale Gray, 60, in the 500 block of El Tejon Avenue. Gray traveled to the Walmart on Rosedale Highway and was spotted shoplifting at 11:15 a.m., authorities said.

He pulled a gun out of his pocket and shot himself in the head as police confronted him in a nearby neighbor-



FELIX ADAMO / THE CALIFORNIAN

Manuel Vela during a court appearance in this file photo.



Ex-NFL football player Lawrence Phillips is arraigned in Kern County Superior Court for murder in this file photo.

HENRY A. BARRIOS THE CALIFORNIAN

hood. Gray was not positively identified until 5 p.m., about nine hours after the shootings occurred.

Family of Gray said in search warrants that he sympathized with ISIS and had recently begun threatening relatives. Others alleged he was a member of a white supremacist street gang.

### MURDER SUSPECT ACCUSED OF CUTTING BABY OUT OF GIRLFRIEND

A 28-year-old Bakersfield man is accused of the year's grisliest crime — strangling his 39-weeks-pregnant girlfriend and then cutting the baby out of her.

Manuel Vela was arrested following a chase through Bakersfield streets Dec. 10 during which he dangled the baby out the car's window, court documents said.

Vela told investigators he struck his girlfriend, Katrina Rivera, 30, the evening of Dec. 8, then strangled her. He drove around with her body in his car before stopping and cutting the baby out of her with a razor blade, Vela said in court documents.

He is charged with two counts of first-degree murder and is being held without bail.

### COUNTY SETTLES DAVID SAL SILVA WRONGFUL DEATH LAWSUIT

In May, the County of Kern settled a lawsuit involving allegations of

wrongful death and excessive force in the death of Bakersfield resident David Sal Silva for \$3.4 million.

The confrontation between Silva and deputies, which resulted in protests and calls for increased scrutiny of law enforcement, began just before midnight on May 7, 2013, after deputies responded to a report of an intoxicated man outside Kern Medical Center. Silva had been found sleeping across the street from the hospital.

Deputies tried waking him, and an altercation ensued in which Silva fought multiple law enforcement officers and a K9.

He was restrained, but became unresponsive shortly afterward and was pronounced dead within an hour of the incident.

An autopsy determined Silva died as a result of heart disease and had methamphetamine, a muscle relaxant and alcohol in his system at time of death.

Attorneys for the Silva family alleged law enforcement used excessive force, but Sheriff Donny Youngblood said his deputies performed their job as they were supposed to and he was not in favor of the settlement.



Silva