

Ex-firefighter going to prison for arson

A former CalFire firefighter from Placerville with a penchant to set fires is going to prison for five years.

Benjamin Cunha, 33, was sentenced Feb. 23 after admitting to setting at least 30 wildland fires in El Dorado and Amador counties during the summers of 2006 and 2007. Two of these fires burned onto federal land.

He must also pay \$246,862 in restitution to CalFire.

When he was arrested in December 2008 this was not the first time he was charged with arson. In March 2008 his sentence for having set three fires was suspended with several conditions. They included registering as an arsonist for the rest of his life and wearing a tracking device during the fire season.

"As he admitted in his plea agreement, this defendant set a multitude of fires with a callous disregard for the danger to life and property that he was inflicting," U.S. Attorney Wagner said in a statement. "(Tuesday's) sentence is a just result that takes a serial arsonist off the streets."

On Oct. 6, he pleaded guilty to one count of arson for the July 6, 2007, Mine Fire, a vegetation fire that burned approximately 80 acres.

Cunha was a seasonal employee for CalFir during the 2001, 2002 and 2003 fire seasons. At the time of the arson activity, he was a volunteer firefighter for Diamond Springs.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report