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DISABLED TRUCKER CHARGED IN 2 ARSONS MACOMB PROSECUTORS SAY HE BURNED MANY BOATS

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By KIM NORTH SHINE and JEANNE MAY FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

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Illustration: Map Detroit Free Press; VPhoto HUGH GRANNUM/Detroit Free Press

Memo: SEE MICROFILM PAGE 8A FOR CHRONOLOGY OF BOAT FIRES; CORRECTION RAN OCTOBER 26, 1999

Bruised and scraped, Richard Sarvis was charged Friday with two boat arsons and accused by prosecutors of torching dozens more in the Harrison Township fires that have baffled police for a year.

Sarvis' attorney, Scott Weinberg, told 41B District Judge John Foster that Sarvis is mentally ill and unable to understand the charges against him.

Police say he was seen setting a power boat on fire Thursday night; a second fire was reported the same night -- the one-year anniversary of the first boat fires.

Sarvis, 38, of Clinton Township began to describe his problems to the judge in the courtroom near the Macomb County Jail: "Severe anxiety, road rage ..."

Weinberg hushed his 6-foot-2-inch, 230-pound client, who was wearing sandals and traditional black-and-white striped prison garb.

Weinberg said Sarvis is a truck driver who's been on disability for two years since being diagnosed with bipolar disorder, which causes poor judgment and recklessness.

Foster set Sarvis' bail at \$500,000 cash, saying the court must assure the public is protected. Sarvis faces a number of charges, including the two arsons Thursday, resisting arrest, drunken driving and possession of marijuana.

The drunken driving and drug charges stem from a Sept. 12 arrest, when police questioned Sarvis about four arsons that night.

The judge granted Weinberg's request to have Sarvis undergo competency testing before setting a preliminary examination, where it will be decided whether there's enough evidence to go to trial.

Sarvis' arrest brought comfort to marina owners, who said Friday they were grateful and eager for the fires to end.

"It's been a long year," said Marc Boeckl, owner of Sundog Marina, which was hit three times. "We lost five boats in the first fire....It's your personal property. You take it personally."

But neighbors of Sarvis said they can't imagine that the police have the right guy. They did not want to be named, but one called him "a gentle fellow."

During his six years as their neighbor, Sarvis came to be known for exchanging friendly conversation and leftover dinners and hiring himself out for chores, neighbors said. And he loved building model cars and planes, they said.

He was meticulous about his condominium, they said. His parents live in the same complex. They could not be reached for comment. On Thursday, the front of Sarvis' home was decorated with pumpkins.

"We're all just shocked about this," one woman said.

But Macomb County Prosecutor Carl Marlinga described Sarvis as dangerous, and said he appears to be the person who "has been troubling this county and community for a long time."

Marlinga had urged the judge to set a high bond.

"There is good reason to believe he may be involved in the other arsons," Marlinga said.

Weinberg said there "is no evidence that he was involved in any other crime or the even the one last night."

He couldn't explain why Sarvis would have been at Freedom Marine Sales, the site of the latest fire, when he doesn't own a boat. He said Sarvis is under psychiatric care and taking medication for mental illness. "I'm not convinced he clearly knows what's going on."

Macomb County Sheriff William Hackel said investigators know Sarvis set two fires. As for others, "there's a lot of investigation still to go."

More than two dozen boats worth up to \$5 million total were burned since Oct. 21, 1998. In an earlier fire, surveillance video had a white truck matching Sarvis' truck leaving the scene, but police couldn't trace it.

Volunteers staked out marinas Thursday. "There was so much publicity about it, we were surprised this person would dare come out," Hackel said.

But two volunteers from the Sheriff's Department's marine reserve said he did. Their identities are being withheld, but Hackel said they were sitting in their car when they saw a man in a 1998 GMC white pickup stop at Freedom Marine on Jefferson near Crocker, get out, look at a boat and leave.

The same man returned about 9 p.m., Hackel said, about an hour and a half later, walked up to the boat and lobbed something over his head as if making a hook shot with a basketball.

"The boat burst into flames and he got in his car and drove off," Hackel said. The volunteers radioed to deputies.

Hackel said Sarvis refused to get out of the truck when deputies stopped him. When the deputies pulled him out, he fell and cut his head, Hackel said.

But Weinberg said: "Clearly he was roughed up."

Hackel said deputies didn't know that a second boat had been set on fire until after the arrest, when an employee of the Harbor Club North Marina called.

"He's the guy we believe did the two last night. I'll be discussing with Carl Marlinga to see if there's enough evidence for the others," Hackel said.

KIM NORTH SHINE can be reached at 810-469-8085. {MARGINALIA}!--#include virtual="/index/fl_locmac.fhtml"-->

{KEYWORDS} BOAT; ARSON; FIRE; ARREST

Caption: Suspect Richard Sarvis, 38, is arraigned before 41B District Judge John Foster in Macomb County on Friday. He is flanked by Prosecutor Carl Marlinga, left, and attorney Scott Weinberg. Marina owners said they are relieved someone has been charged.

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