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PRESS RELEASE

A Hopland man who set fire to his house in a bid to kill his wife last year entered a guilty plea on Thursday to attempted murder in the first degree, a move Mendocino County prosecutors said averted a time-consuming trial that was scheduled to begin next week.

Deputy District Attorney Shannon Cox said the guilty plea exposes Steven Chiriboga, formerly of Hopland, to a prison sentence of life with the possibility of parole. In return for Chiriboga's change of plea, the prosecutor dismissed five other charges because the underlying facts supporting those counts will still be considered and additional convictions would not have materially changed Chiriboga's prison exposure.

"We believe that justice will be served by Chiriboga's change of plea," said Cox. Cox also said Chiriboga's wife was pleased with the outcome. "She is relieved she does not have to go through a trial."

On Thursday afternoon, Cox and Public Defender Linda Thompson outlined in open court the agreement to Judge Richard Henderson, who accepted Chiriboga's plea and cancelled a trial scheduled to get under way on Monday.

Henderson set Chiriboga's sentencing for Sept. 30. In the meantime Chiriboga's bail status was changed to no bail so that he will remain in custody at the Mendocino County Jail.

Chiriboga was taken into custody in Sonoma County on Sept. 6, 2010, two days after he fled Hopland following his wife's rescue by neighbors from a Mountain House Road residence.

Investigators said Chiriboga had opened valves to a gas line in the house's kitchen, and set it on fire after his wife returned home. He refused to let his wife leave the burning house, which had been barricaded shut.

Neighbors were able to force their way into the house, and drag Chiriboga and his wife out of the burning structure. Chiriboga then fled in his pickup truck, where he was spotted two days later in the Sea Ranch area.

As the criminal conduct was unfolding at the Chiriboga residence, the Hopland Fire Department was holding its annual fundraising BBQ just down the road. As a result, the firemen were able to quickly respond to the fire and extinguish it.