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The Specialist Layer of P&C Claims

Fire Origin and Cause Investigation Services: Market Landscape, Demand Drivers, Buyers and M&A Activity

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 01** The loss pool is large: 470,500 structure fires and 211,500 vehicle fires caused \$19.1 billion of direct property damage in 2024 (NFPA).
- 02** Consolidation is active: J.S. Held (Kelso), Command Investigations (Incline Equity) and Alpine Intel (New Mountain) have closed eight forensic or investigation deals since 2024.
- 03** Specialists are the supply: NEFCO, S-E-A, ESI and Nelson Forensics remain founder owned; vehicle-fire expertise is the scarcest skill in the segment.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fire origin and cause (O&C) investigation is the specialist layer of the property and auto claims chain. When a structure or vehicle burns, the carrier needs a defensible answer to two questions before it can pay, deny or recover the claim: where did the fire start and what caused it. Certified investigators working to NFPA 921 and NFPA 1033 produce that answer, and it feeds three decisions with real money attached: coverage and arson determinations, subrogation recoveries against manufacturers, contractors and utilities, and expert testimony when the file is litigated. The work is billed by the hour and won on reputation and carrier panel relationships, not contracts.

Three forces are lifting demand. Subrogation is a profit lever, with carriers recovering an estimated \$51.6 billion in subrogation and salvage in 2021 (industry estimates citing NAIC). Severity and complexity are rising, with lithium-ion and electric-vehicle fires adding technical questions generalist adjusters cannot answer. And carriers are consolidating vendor panels, which is pulling private equity backed platforms into the segment through add-on acquisitions of exactly the kind of specialist firm this note describes.

This Evolve Research note covers the US fire origin and cause investigation market, the demand drivers behind it, the consolidators, specialists and adjacent platforms that make up the landscape, and the M&A activity that is reshaping it.

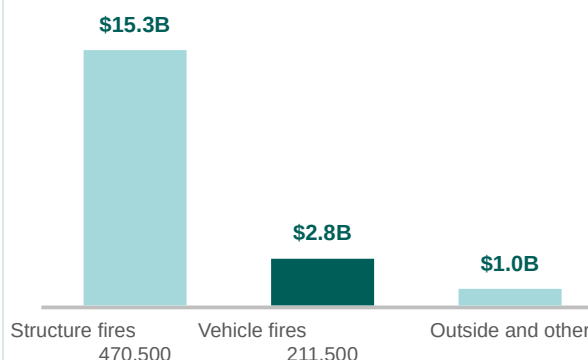
01 What Origin and Cause Investigation Is, and Who Pays for It

A O&C investigation determines the origin (where a fire started) and the cause (the ignition source and the first fuel) using the scientific method set out in NFPA 921, Guide for Fire and Explosion Investigations (2024 edition). Investigators are qualified against NFPA 1033 (2022 edition) and typically hold the IAAI-CFI or NAFI-CFEI credential; IAAI's January 2025 roster lists roughly 2,000 credentialed CFIs worldwide. Adherence to those standards is what gets an investigator's opinion past a Daubert or Rule 702 challenge, so the standards are the commercial moat as much as the technical one.

The buyers are P&C carriers (property and auto claims units, SIU and subrogation departments), third-party administrators, subrogation service providers and the law firms that pursue recoveries or defend product and premises cases. Assignments arrive one file at a time, are billed hourly plus travel, and concentrate with a small number of national carriers that keep panels of trusted vendors. There are no long-term contracts; volume follows reputation, response time and the quality of the written report on the stand.

The segment sits between three larger neighbors: independent adjusting and TPA services (who assign the work), forensic engineering (who take the complex electrical, mechanical and structural questions) and SIU or surveillance investigation (who handle the fraud side). The national forensic consolidators have all added fire investigation practices; the pure O&C specialists remain small, regional and mostly founder owned.

2024 US Direct Fire Property Damage, \$ Billions



Source: NFPA, Fire Loss in the United States During 2024, November 2025.

02 Demand Drivers: Subrogation, Severity and New Fire Risks

Subrogation is the economic engine. Carriers recovered an estimated \$51.6 billion through subrogation and salvage in 2021 (industry estimates citing NAIC data), and a O&C finding that points to a defective appliance, a contractor or a utility is the document that opens that recovery. The largest fire subrogations on record are utility cases: PG&E paid about \$11 billion to insurers for the 2017 to 2018 California wildfires and Southern California Edison settled the Woolsey fire claims for \$2.2 billion (Artemis, January 2025). California's 2026 fight over insurers' right to subrogate against utilities shows how much is at stake.

Severity and complexity are rising. Direct property damage per structure fire has climbed as rebuild costs have, and lithium-ion battery and EV fires bring thermal-runaway behavior and toxic byproducts that demand specialist handling; Allianz Commercial attributes 15% to 30% of EV fires to charging (Risk & Insurance, August 2025). Vehicle-fire expertise in particular is thin: the investigators who can defend a vehicle-fire origin opinion in court number in the dozens nationally, not the thousands.

Litigation keeps the bar high and the fees durable. Every contested fire claim, product case and utility subrogation runs through a Daubert or Rule 702 gate, and only investigators who follow NFPA 921 and hold the right credentials survive it, which is why carriers and counsel pay for named experts rather than the lowest hourly rate. At the same time carriers are trimming vendor panels toward partners that can take a file from scene to recovery; that preference is what is pulling SIU platforms, adjusting groups and their sponsors into the O&C segment as acquirers.



Command Investigations. Lake Mary, FL insurance investigations platform (SIU, surveillance, field investigations, intelligence) acquired by Incline Equity Partners in March 2025 and now ten acquisitions deep, including CoventBridge's insurance division in July 2026, which made it the largest insurance investigations organization in the US with 900+ investigators in all 50 states. Fire origin and cause is the adjacent capability the platform does not yet own in house.

03 The Landscape: Consolidators, Specialists and Platforms

The landscape has three tiers. At the top sit national, private equity backed forensic consolidators that carry fire investigation as one practice among many: J.S. Held (Kelso & Company, 1,500+ professionals, five forensic add-ons since 2021), Rimkus (HGGC, 1,400+ staff, fire and explosion science), Envista Forensics (Cor Partners / BW Forsyth), EFI Global (Sedgwick, backed by Carlyle, Stone Point, CDPQ and Altas), The Vertex Companies (Wind Point Partners) and Haag, which joined employee-owned Salas O'Brien in June 2024 after Blackstone's minority investment. A second group of insurance-focused platforms bundles O&C with claims data and engineering: Alpine Intel (New Mountain Capital; Donan Engineering, National Fire Experts, BSC Forensics) and Keystone Experts and Engineers (Mason Wells) are the closest strategic analogs to a fire specialist.

The middle tier is the specialist supply: NEFCO (150+ origin and cause experts, family owned since 1993), S-E-A, Engineering Systems Inc., Nelson Forensics, Warren Forensics, Forensic Analysis & Engineering, Casalinova Investigations, Fire Cause Analysis and Pyr-Tech, plus dozens of regional firms with five to 30 investigators. Almost all are founder, family or employee owned and none has disclosed a sponsor. The third tier is the SIU and claims-investigation platforms that now sit next to the segment: Command Investigations (Incline Equity), Advantage Investigations (Align Capital Partners), Ethos Risk (Carousel Capital), Frasco and Delta Group, all of which have bought adjacent capabilities in the last three years.

	Forensic consolidators	O&C specialists	SIU and claims platforms
Representative firms	J.S. Held, Rimkus, Envista, EFI Global, Vertex, Haag, Alpine Intel	NEFCO, S-E-A, ESI, Nelson, Warren, Casalinova, Fire Cause Analysis	Command Investigations, Advantage Investigations, Ethos Risk, Frasco
Ownership	PE platforms: Kelso, HGGC, BW Forsyth, Carlyle / Altas, Wind Point, New Mountain	Founder, family or employee owned; no disclosed sponsors	PE platforms: Incline Equity, Align Capital, Carousel Capital
Scale	300 to 1,500+ professionals, national and international offices	5 to 150 investigators, regional to national networks	Hundreds of field investigators; Command 900+ after CoventBridge
What they buy	Geographic reach, practice depth, expert benches	Rarely acquire; they are the acquisition targets	Adjacent services carriers already buy from them
Fit for a fire specialist	Add-on into an existing fire practice; brand often absorbed	Merger of equals is rare; talent is the constraint	New capability line; brand and team typically preserved

The practical read for a specialist owner: there are three distinct kinds of buyer, and they value the same firm differently. A forensic consolidator prices a fire team as capacity inside a practice it already runs. A specialist peer can rarely fund a deal. An SIU or claims platform, or the sponsor behind it, prices the firm as a new service line its carrier clients already ask for, and it has the most reason to keep the name, the people and the client relationships intact.

Alpine Intel	Alpine Intel. Charlotte, NC analytical claims-services platform formed in December 2021 when New Mountain Capital merged Donan Engineering with CCG IQ. Brands include Donan, National Fire Experts, BSC Forensics, HVACi, StrikeCheck, VRC Investigations and The Robison Group; services explicitly include fire investigations and vehicle services for national and regional P&C carriers, TPAs and law firms. The clearest example of a sponsor building a carrier-facing platform with fire origin and cause at its center.
Keystone Experts and Engineers	Keystone Experts and Engineers. National provider of forensic engineering and consulting services to insurance carriers, including fire and explosion investigation, storm and catastrophe damage assessment and subrogation support. Received a growth investment from Mason Wells in March 2024 to expand services and its claims technology platform. Direct evidence that a lower middle market sponsor will back a carrier-facing fire and forensic investigation firm as a platform, not just as an add-on.

04 M&A Activity: Who Is Buying, and Why

Deal flow in and around fire investigation has been steady since 2018 and accelerated in 2024 to 2026. Almost every transaction is an undisclosed-value add-on to a sponsor-backed platform, which is exactly the shape a specialist sale takes. The table lists the transactions that define the segment; values were not disclosed in the primary press releases for any of them, and Evolve does not estimate what was not disclosed.

Date	Target	Acquirer / sponsor	What it adds
Aug 2026	Element Forensic Engineering (Toronto, 40+ staff)	J.S. Held (Kelso & Company)	Fire investigation, structural and building science in Canada
Aug 2026	Jensen Hughes (fire protection engineering)	New Mountain Capital, from Gryphon	Sponsor-to-sponsor sale of a 1,500+ person fire engineering firm
Jul 2026	CoventBridge Group, insurance division	Command Investigations (Incline Equity)	Largest US insurance investigations platform, 900+ investigators
Jun 2026	Lange Technical Services	Advantage Investigations (Align Capital)	Insurance investigative services add-on
Nov 2025	SCM Insurance Services (incl. Pario forensic engineering)	Davies Group (BC Partners)	Adjusting, forensic engineering and investigations, Canada
Aug 2025	GHL Consultants	J.S. Held (Kelso & Company)	Canadian forensic engineering add-on
Mar 2025	Command Investigations	Incline Equity Partners	Platform buyout; accelerated M&A into adjacent markets
Dec 2024	Roar Engineering	Sdii Global	Structural and materials forensic engineering for P&C claims
Jun 2024	Haag Global (forensic engineering, est. 1924)	Salas O'Brien (employee owned; Blackstone minority)	Fire, roofing and property-loss forensic engineering
Mar 2024	Keystone Experts and Engineers	Mason Wells (growth investment)	Forensic engineering for carriers incl. fire and explosion
Feb 2024	Rimkus Consulting Group	HGGC (growth investment; Century Equity rolled)	1,400+ person forensic platform incl. fire and explosion science
Dec 2021	Donan Engineering + CCG IQ	New Mountain Capital (formed Alpine Intel)	Fire and forensic engineering merged with claims analytics
May 2019	J.S. Held	Kelso & Company, from Lovell Minnick	Platform buyout; 10+ forensic add-ons since
Dec 2018	Sedgwick (parent of EFI Global)	Carlyle Group, with Stone Point and CDPQ	Global claims platform; Altas Partners added \$1 billion in 2024

Source: company and sponsor press releases (PR Newswire, Business Wire), Capital IQ and PitchBook as cited in Evolve's Claims Market Update (September 2026); values not disclosed.

Why buyers pay for it. Sponsors describe the logic plainly. Announcing the Command Investigations deal, Incline Equity's Tom Ritchie said the firm had "earned a strong reputation as a comprehensive provider in a fragmented industry" and that "through accelerated M&A we plan to expand the Company's high-quality offerings and enter adjacent markets" (PR Newswire, March 27, 2025). Command's Seth Markham framed the CoventBridge deal as offering carriers "the broadest investigator coverage in the country" (PR Newswire, July 7, 2026). Kelso's investment in J.S. Held was described by Arrowpoint Advisory as "the genesis of a highly ambitious buy-and-build project."

Three rationales recur across the table: coverage (a national panel needs investigators where the losses are), capability (fire, explosion and vehicle expertise are hard to hire and slow to train), and bundling (carriers prefer fewer vendors that can take a file from first notice through recovery). A fire specialist with a national carrier book, a bench of certified investigators and a vehicle-fire practice speaks to all three.

For owners of specialist firms the implication is timing. Buyers with capital and a stated appetite for adjacent investigation capabilities are active now, carriers are rewarding multi-service partners, and the supply of experienced vehicle- and structure-fire investigators is aging out faster than it is being replaced. Independence has been the right strategy for 40 years; the next five will reward the firms that choose their partner rather than have one chosen for them.

OUTLOOK

Consolidation in fire origin and cause will continue to run through three channels: the national forensic consolidators filling geographic gaps, insurance-focused platforms such as Alpine Intel and Keystone adding depth, and SIU and claims-investigation platforms such as Command Investigations adding O&C as a new line. Deal values will stay undisclosed and deal sizes small, because the targets are. The scarce asset is not a brand or a building; it is a bench of investigators whose opinions hold up in court, and the vehicle-fire bench is the scarcest of all. Expect the best specialist firms to be approached, not to have to knock.

SOURCES

Fire loss, standards and certification

NFPA, "Fire Loss in the United States During 2024" (Shelby Hall), November 2025

NFPA 921, Guide for Fire and Explosion Investigations, 2024 edition; NFPA 1033, Standard for Professional Qualifications for Fire Investigator, 2022 edition

International Association of Arson Investigators, IAAI-CFI member roster, January 2025; NAFI, CFEI certification page, accessed September 2026

Demand drivers

Artemis, "California wildfires: Subrogation topic raised, as utilities come into focus," January 14, 2025

Risk & Insurance, "EV Charging Infrastructure Emerges as Major Risk Factor Despite Lower Fire Rates," August 20, 2025 (Allianz Commercial data)

Industry estimates of \$51.6 billion of 2021 subrogation and salvage recoveries citing NAIC data (CLARA Analytics, January 2026); CalMatters and Los Angeles Times on the 2026 California subrogation bill, August 2026

Company landscape

Company websites and press pages: jsheld.com, rimkus.com, envistaforensics.com, efiglobal.com, haagglobal.com, alpineintel.com, nefco.net, sealimited.com, engsys.com, nelsonforensics.com, accessed September 8, 2026

Kelso & Company and Harvest Partners portfolio pages; Wind Point Partners (Vertex, 2021); Salas O'Brien (Haag, June 19, 2024; Blackstone, January 22, 2024)

M&A activity

PR Newswire: Incline Equity Partners / Command Investigations, March 27, 2025; Command Investigations / CoventBridge, July 7, 2026; J.S. Held / Element Forensic Engineering, August 13, 2026; Carlyle / Sedgwick, December 31, 2018

Business Wire: Gryphon Investors / New Mountain Capital / Jensen Hughes, August 4, 2026; Advantage Investigations / Lange Technical Services, June 30, 2026

BC Partners / Davies / SCM Insurance Services, November 10, 2025; Alpine Intel, Donan and CCG IQ merger, December 20, 2021; Evolve Capital, P&C Insurance Claims Market Update 1H 2026 (precedent tables citing Capital IQ and PitchBook), September 2026

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