

Fire summit sizzles with info, fizzles with attendance

By Austin Fay

STATELINE – Every tax paying homeowner in the Lake Tahoe Basin was sent a postcard notifying him or her of Friday's fire symposium. From the approximately 40,000 postcards that were sent, about 10 homeowners showed up at Harveys.

The symposium of fire chiefs, decision-makers, land managers, and homeowners was part of the larger inaugural weeklong Living With Fire program.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Nevada Association of Counties, Nevada Division of Forestry, Nevada Insurance Council, Nevada Fire Safe Council, Sierra Front Wildfire Cooperators, the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, and U.S. Forest Service all sponsored the program.



John Schuler,
a defensible
space
inspector at
the Sierra
Fire
Protection
District in
Washoe County,
educates Petra

Schuler, a
South Shore
homeowner.
Photo/Austin
Fay

For a number of years Nevada has had a similar summit in May, but it has never been well attended by people in the basin. Having it this week in July was intended to draw second homeowners who may have been in town for the holiday week.

Speakers came from both sides of the state line. Kit Bailey, fire chief for the local Forest Service office, talked about wildland fires and how they affect homeowners in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Mike Vollmer of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency gave an informative talk on what qualifies as defensible space as well as how to defend one's home against fires.

A panel of homeowners – Paula Lambdin, Leona Allen, and Warren Berg – shared stories and told of the precautions they took during the 2007 Angora Fire, all of them emphasizing the effectiveness of having a defensible space. Lambdin and Allen lost their houses along with 252 other homeowners, but Berg's was spared as he had protected his home by implementing defensible space recommendations.

There were also breakout sessions Friday where the few homeowners in attendance could meet with their division fire chief and learn details of the specific precautions their fire district has taken, as well as what homeowners can do to prepare in the event of a fire. Many fire districts hold smaller community events designed to educate the homeowners in their district, but this is the first time a basin-wide event has taken place.

Some of the measures included: creating a defensible space, replacing wooden roofs, joining a fire chapter, removing

juniper bushes below windows, moving firewood stacks from structures, educating oneself and spreading knowledge throughout the community.

Things that homeowners could do were cited along with the reasons why homeowners don't take steps to protect themselves. According to officials, the top six reasons why homeowners don't implement defensible space are:

- Liking the trees and vegetation
- Cost
- Time
- Agency rules
- Loss of privacy
- Erosion concerns.

"We have a good fire department, but chances are any fire that comes through there, it will burn every lot," Marilyn McDonald, a Fallen Leaf Lake resident, said.

The area where McDonald lives is currently being considered in the South Shore Fuel Reduction Project by the Forest Service. The review is expected to be published later this fall as to whether it is a priority for fuel reduction.

There is also a stewardship program for lots in the basin neighboring Forest Service land that allows for homeowners to remove brush, surface fuels and ladder fuels up to 100 feet from the house. The only precautionary measure not directly allowed is cutting trees. To a degree, and with a permit from the Forest Service, homeowners can maintain the tree growth around their homes.

Tahoe Regional Planning Agency changed its parameters for do-it-yourself defensible space preparation after the Angora

Fire. Citizens can go in and do much of the defensible space preparation themselves. A tree 14 inches or less in diameter at breast height that is not in a stream area or has other restrictions can be cut by a resident without a permit.

South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Lorenzo Gigliotti spoke about the Federal Emergency Management Agency grant the city is eligible for. Seven months ago, his department applied for a pre-hazard mitigation grant from FEMA to help pay for replacing the wooden roofs in South Lake Tahoe. After a screening of the nearly 9,500 single-family homes in South Lake Tahoe, 1,308 were found to have wooden roofs. The grant, if the district receives it, would pay for about 75 percent of the total replacement costs to go to a fire-resistant roof.

Tom Rosenberg, a full-time South Shore resident and homeowner, came because he was interested in fuel reduction initiatives.

“The turnout was disappointing to me,” Rosenberg said. “It’s up to us to do it ourselves. And at this point the regulations are very gentle.” Meaning there aren’t a lot of sticks, but there are a lot of carrots to create incentives for homeowners to educate and protect themselves against fire, he added.

Jessica Mencken of the Nevada Fire Safe Council had much to say about the low attendance.

“Getting people informed about events like this is the most frustrating part of my job,” Mencken said. “Nobody cares until, ‘oh no, it’s in my backyard’ and now, three years later, people don’t care. You get 10 people.”

But the publisher of *Lake Tahoe News*, a tax paying homeowner in the basin, never received one of the postcards that were supposedly sent. So the outreach is questionable.

Chief John Pang of Meeks Bay Fire Department said, “The first year you put on an event like this, you’re going to have a slow turnout, you’re asking people to come indoors for an

entire day and for our second homeowners, it's really difficult."

In contrast, 1,100 people turned out for the Meeks Bay Fire Department's 42nd pancake breakfast last weekend, where they had access to much of the information presented at the symposium.

"Unfortunately, if we had a fire last week, this place would be packed," Pang said.