

# Fire weather station going up this summer

By Susan Wood

Come summer, Smokey Bear could be more accurate on forecasts than weather reporters. And he's probably kept his job longer – since 1944.



The fire weather prediction station LTBMU will install this summer resembles this photo.

The Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit plans to erect in Meyers a fire weather station that looks like a cross between a tripod and a spaceship. Still, this \$15,000 device reads levels of relative humidity, precipitation depth, fuel moisture, solar radiation, along with wind speed and direction. It sends those readings to a computer program that provides fire danger for the U.S. Forest. From there, Smokey Bear signs will indicate fire hazards that include the five levels: “low, moderate, high, very high and extreme.”

The most commonly seen sign exists in front of the South Lake Tahoe visitor's center off Highway 50 next to Campground by

the Lake. One may also call the LTBMU fire danger recorded line at (530) 644.6048.

In contrast, "red flag" fire warnings originate with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

A similar weather station now stands at the Meyers fire station, but it's so old it no longer meets National Fire Danger Rating System guidelines, and it can't be repaired. Moreover, structure development has hindered the satellite readings from the 29-year-old unit referred to by the Forest Service as RAWs (Remote Access Weather Station).

Fire resources will be managed by the readings – including those crews out in the woods cutting. On dry days, machinery even intended to reduce fire fuel can start one.

"That's where we locally see our fire dangers. It's extremely important," said John Washington, LTBMU fuels division chief.

The Forest Service aimed to find adequate space, ground cover, air flow and sunlight. At a mere \$500 in costs, the new RAWs will be installed at the end of Mohawk Street near Lake Baron. It will take up 400 square feet and will be fenced in. When the snow completely melts in the area, about 200 feet of vegetation must be cleared from the site. Crews will need to take down 25 trees under the proposal, which already passed its required comment period.

"It definitely does help because it helps us compile all our available resources," Lake Valley Fire Chief Jeff Michael said.

Much like the Lake Tahoe Basin sits at the cusp of heavy moisture between the El Nino and La Nina weather phenomena, the National Wildland Significant Fire Potential Outlook from April through July this year reports "equal chances" of a bad fire season in this region of the Sierra Nevada. Fire officials will sometimes say when it's wet more fuel for the

fire grows. When it's dry, the terrain sparks easily.

Predicting is one thing. Prevention is quite another.

“(The RAWS) will help – but we still knew we were in a high fire danger and had a red flag warning during the Angora Fire. Sometimes we can have all the technology in the world, but it still takes preventing and doing what we can and telling others to do what they can. Fire's going to happen,” said Leona Allen, a former city dispatcher who was on the job when her father's home burned in the devastating fire in 2007 that consumed 254 homes. The lot is now home to a commemorative garden, and Allen works for Lake Valley Fire.