

Chopper replaces mechanical equipment for fuels reduction

By Kathryn Reed

If and when a fire erupts at the Y, a natural fuel break will have been established in the middle of South Lake Tahoe so it doesn't destroy the entire city.

That is the purpose of the nearly 50-acre fuel reduction project at Lake Christopher near Trout Creek and Pioneer Trail. It's the final project to create a break for when the next catastrophic fire strikes. Areas above and below have been treated in recent years.



A helicopter
April 28
removes cut
trees from the
Lake
Christopher
area.
Photos/Kathryn
Reed

When the U.S. Forest Service gets around to its much talked about South Shore Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project, this part of the city that borders on the fed's property will have been treated.

Much of what is being cleared from this stream environmental zone looks like bad firewood. Not much of it is logs. A lot is slash. A few Jeffery pines are being removed, but mostly it's lodgepole because they love wet areas.

Men on the ground felled the trees with chain saws. Today is the third day pilot Matt Turner is using a helicopter to lift the debris to one of three landing areas.

"This way is better than pile burning," explained Dave Mercer, the contractor for the project. "There is going to be a little disturbance. People don't understand what a forest should look like."

He's out in the woods with his crew making sure everything is going according to plan. One eye is on the men securing the chokes to the piles of wood and another on the helicopter hovering above.

This method Mercer proposed means no big machines on the ground. So, even though the ground is not pristine because trees have been felled, it looks nothing like when skidders, harvesters and other equipment are used.

A few acres by South Tahoe Public Utility District headquarters will have mechanical means used to clear the area, but it's not in an SEZ.

With Lake Christopher being a stream zone and snow still on the ground, it may never have been permitted if equipment had to be brought in. As it was, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency deferred the permitting process to the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board even though the memorandum of understanding between the agencies defers the permitting to TRPA. TRPA officials were not available to explain why they were unable to do their job and asked someone else to do so.

"TRPA wanted to pile burn," Mercer said.

South Tahoe Fire Marshal Ray Zachau agrees with Mercer's assessment about people not understanding what a healthy forest looks like. He hired a forester to plan this project for fuels reduction and creating a healthy forest.

"If we can keep a fire on the ground, we can put it out," Zachau said. "Once it's in the canopy, we really can't stop it."

Both men get an earful from people who don't want any trees removed. But without fire coming through to naturally thin the forest, the stands are overgrown and create more of a threat. Plus, it's not good for plant and animal species.

This \$147,000 project is being funded by a Forest Service grant and money from the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act. The entire project is supposed to take about three weeks, with four to five days of flying.

Mercer isn't sure what he'll do with the chips. Some may stay in town for a construction site's erosion control measures. Some may go to a cogeneration plant in Susanville.

There's no money in selling this material – the market has dried up. It's to the city's benefit if the contractor could make money off the end product because then the bid would have come in lower.

Still, this type of removal is more economical than mechanized, according to Zachau.

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