

Memories of Angora Fire fuel anxieties at Wildfire Summit

By Stephen Ward

TAHOE CITY-The frustration was palpable among the roughly 85 firefighters and homeowners who gathered for the Wildfire Summit at the Granlibakken Resort in Tahoe City on Friday. The crowd, who came to learn more about preventing wildfires, expressed their grievances about residents they considered inconsiderate and/or clueless about fire safety within their communities.



Representatives from Incline Village to South Lake Tahoe cited a lack of communication between local agencies and homeowner apprehension as reasons for why the region has had trouble getting residents to develop defensible space around the area.

In fact, the barrage of excuses homeowners deploy to evade reconditioning their property was the centerpiece of one speaker's presentation. Ed Smith, a natural resources specialist for the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, listed 15 reasons people don't prepare for wildfires, many echoing the sentiments said above, with a PowerPoint slide accompanying each point he made.

"Lack of action is a lack of means, motive and opportunity," Smith said while introducing his points.

But Smith's lecture wasn't spent ridiculing locals – he offered several tips on how to prepare for the worst. Smith advised residents to remove dead trees, create more separation among those that are living and to detach the lower branches of trees so fire can't climb to the top.

After Smith's talk, attendees dispersed into groups based on their residence. In the South Lake Tahoe and Fallen Leaf Lake group, eight members of the community spent their time more as a think tank than a preventative measure session. Most members of the group worked with a fire prevention agency in the area.

Jess Mahnken, project coordinator for Nevada Fire Safe Council, addressed the difficulty of explaining defensible space to lake residents.

"Just like every property is different, every homeowner is different," she said. "You need to hold every hand in a different way."

Memories of the Angora fire fueled many of the anxieties overheard at the summit, with several attendees referring to the disaster during the breakout sessions. Jeff Michael, chief of Lake Valley's Fire Protection District, touched on the lessons his group learned from the fire earlier in the day, including how to respond more quickly and effectively to wildfires.

Another point Mahnken highlighted at the summit was the incentives for residents to develop defensible space. For instance, the Fire Safe Council offers a 50 percent rebate, up to \$1,000, for homeowners who renovate their property. Some communities even have grant programs that allow the \$1,000 cap to be lifted.

The Fire Safe Council hosted the event in partnership with the University of California Cooperative Extension and University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, with funding from the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and vendors at the conference.

Although the summit had a considerably large crowd, few attendees were actual homeowners; most of the people there were clothed in fire marshal outfits or were involved with an agency.

However, one of the few homeowners who did attend left feeling better about her knowledge of wildfire prevention.

“I thought the talks were exceptionally good,” Patricia Owens, who has been an Incline Village resident for 22 years, said. “I wish there were a way to contact more members of the community. People need to relate to the fact that fire is always an ongoing threat to the area.”

Despite the lack of community members, Susie Kocher, chair of the event’s planning committee, was pleased with the summit’s turnout.

“The point we’re trying to make is that this is a really broad, complicated problem,” she said, referring to ambivalence to wildfire prevention. “It’s going to take action from all of us. Everyone has to work together to reduce risk.”