

Fuels project may land South Lake Tahoe in court; forces changes in fire department

By Kathryn Reed

MEYERS – South Lake Tahoe has someone new heading up fuels reduction projects – and it wasn't by choice.

Marty Scheuerman is now the division chief in charge of that aspect of the fire department, with Division Chief Ray Zachau being relieved of that responsibility.

The billing quagmire surrounding the Lake Christopher fuels reduction project that could be settled in court led to the change.



Dave Mercer and Ray Zachau at the Lake Christopher project in April.

Photo/LTN file

“It's not necessarily a decision made exclusively by South Lake Tahoe,” Police-Fire Chief Brian Uhler told *Lake Tahoe News*.

He added, “The change in assignment was necessary to move

things forward.”

Uhler and Scheuerman were attending their first MAC – Multi-Agency Coordinating Committee – on Thursday. The half-day session at Lake Valley Fire Department was about all things fire.

This group of mostly fire chiefs from the basin as well as state and federal land owners came together shortly before the 2007 Angora Fire, but solidified their roles after that destructive wildfire.

Working collectively is a key component of what MAC is about. That is why others influenced what transpired within South Lake Tahoe Fire Department.

(Zachau did not return a phone call.)

Andrew List, executive director of Nevada Fire Safe Council, told the more than two-dozen people at the meeting that contracts are between NFSC and the contractor. Jurisdictions have no authority to authorize expenditures.

“We think he may have a legal issue with the city of South Lake Tahoe,” List said of contractor Dave Mercer.

Mercer cleared the area via helicopter in the spring when everything was so wet. The timber was soaked, weighing more than anticipated. It was so heavy the contractor had to get a larger helicopter to do the work.

All of this led to additional costs to the tune of \$170,000 in order to complete the fuels reduction project.

“The problem with this is its 75 percent over and the bid was already 15 percent higher than the low bidder,” List said. It was also a do-not-exceed contract.

Instead of Mercer going back to the nonprofit Fire Safe Council to explain the situation and ask for a change order,

he received a verbal OK from Zachau to go forward.

List told the fire management contingency in the room that this should “serve as a warning” to them to follow procedures.

Because potential litigation is involved with Mercer wanting to be paid Uhler would not comment further.

Zachau, though, in a July 21 *Lake Tahoe News* story expressed concerned the NFSC is moving beyond what he sees as its charter to act as a financial agent for the fire districts into more of a technical role managing the projects.

“They’ve hijacked the process,” Zachau told *Lake Tahoe News* for that story.