

10,000-acre thinning project may start in 2012 on S. Shore

By Kathryn Reed

With parts of the forest near developed areas being in prime condition for a wildland fire much like in June 2007 when the Angora Fire consumed more than 3,000 acres, the U.S. Forest Service is ready to do something about that land.

Once the long-awaited South Shore Fuel Reduction and Healthy Forest Restoration Project gets under way – which could be next summer – 10,112 acres will be treated.



The 10,000-plus South Shore fuels project could begin in 2012.

Photo/LTN file

Duncan Leao, U.S. Forest Service forester, calls the wildland urban interface (this is where the forest abuts development) on the South Shore one of the areas in the basin that most needs treatment.

“It’s important work to do. We don’t want another Angora Fire. The conditions we are looking at in many places on the South Shore are conditions we saw in Angora before the fire,” Leao told *Lake Tahoe News*.

It will take about four years to thin the trees, with another four years for follow-up treatments. In all, it is roughly estimated to cost \$40 million. The U.S. Forest Service, mostly through the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act, has secured three-quarters of that figure.

Before a single branch is limbed or tree felled, comments on the project will be taken until Oct. 28 from anyone who submitted a comment when the environmental impact statement was first released. If anyone files an objection to the final EIS, it triggers a 30-day resolution period.

Ultimately it is up to the forest supervisor to sign off on the document, allowing the project to go forward.

Then comes the process to obtain the necessary permits. The one from the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board is the biggie.

However, Lauri Kemper, No. 2 at the regional water board, said the draft of the permit has been on hold since February 2010. But it takes more than a signature to make it valid.

California Environmental Quality Act regs are what Lahontan is going by. Lahontan officials must certify the EIS addresses CEQA concerns.

The project will involve working in stream environmental zones – that's a main sticking point for the water board. It doesn't mean no permit; it means a thorough review and not just taking the Forest Service at its word that the EIS is complete and addresses those concerns.

"We're all for fuels reduction," Kemper said.

What could hold up the project is the Lahontan board may not grant a permit until its May meeting. The Forest Service cannot go out to bid until all the permits are in place. This could delay work in what is already a limited season for

thinning because dirt in the basin, per TRPA rules, can only be disturbed between May 1-Oct. 15.

A combination of mechanical and hand treatments are likely to be used.

Whether hand thinning could begin without the Lahontan permit depends on what type of permit Lahontan decides to issue. There are three possible ways it can permit the project.

Trees 16-inches and less in diameter are likely to be felled by hand, while those up to 30 inches would be taken out by machines. Most likely the process will be similar to what is being done in the Angora area in terms of the machines used. The forest pattern will be different because Angora is mostly about removing dead trees.

“A lot of hand work goes pretty quick. Then (people) would see piles. Those may last a couple years,” Leao explained. “With the mechanical you do not see as many piles because most of it is removed.”

Trails used by recreationists will either be off-limits at times or rerouted to ensure no one is hurt as the work is being done.

“It will be a combo of biomass and merchantable material – stuff that could go to a mill will depend if there is a mill nearby. The market is very difficult to predict,” Leao said. “If no sawmill is open, then contractors would have to determine what to do with that. It’s very helpful to have both biomass and saw log markets.”

The USFS decides which trees to thin first based on size – taking out the smallest at the get-go. Then the health of the tree and species are determining factors.

Jeffery and sugar pine, incense cedar and larger trees are ones Leao said the Forest Service wants to keep.

Diseased trees, including ones with mistletoe, will be on the chopping block.

“Ideally, you want a forest with multiple sizes and age classes. You can’t do that with thinning alone,” Leao said. “As we get the WUI stuff done, the forest still has an even age to it. Fire and planting trees, and other methods could be used to get it into a healthier condition. That is more long term.”

To view the South Shore final EIS, go online.