

# Gondola Fire threatened to take out South Shore 10 years ago

By Susan Wood

When up to 30mph winds ignited a hellish wildfire under the town gondola on Lake Tahoe's busiest week a decade ago, firefighters, residents and stakeholders may have sought divine intervention in stopping the 673-acre blaze that threatened 550 structures, forced the evacuation of hundreds of people and cost more than \$3 million to fight.

During four challenging days, they certainly got it – from Heavenly Mountain Resort, an army of firefighting resources including more than 1,700 in fire crews, successful emergency plans and a whole lot of water at their disposal.

Like the Angora Fire five years later, South Shore communities suffered no loss of life from the Heavenly Gondola blaze. This one was presumed to have been sparked by a carelessly discarded cigarette out a gondola car window between towers 11 and 12 on July 2, 2002.



Kit Bailey, fire chief for

the USFS in Tahoe, explains how the Gondola Fire burned. Photos/Kathryn Reed

The impact on those who fought the Gondola Fire and lived through its rage is remembered vividly.

No one may have internalized the crisis more than Kit Bailey, fire management officer for the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit of the U.S. Forest Service.

Bailey, who has spent more than three decades fighting fires, including a stint in Oregon as a smokejumper, has seen it all. But to this day he remembers what intersection he was in when the call came over the radio. The fire officer seemed a little perplexed that any cigarette can start a fire, but he and other fire investigators had no doubt upon examining the area afterward. Some say the odds of a cigarette igniting a blaze are 1 in 10, but Bailey believes they could be even higher. No suspect has ever been fingered, despite lengthy interviews conducted of guests.

“It’s difficult for a cigarette to start one. It has to land in the right spot in the right fuels,” he said, while recently surveying the point of origin with *Lake Tahoe News*. Ironically, a cigarette butt lay close to the same spot as it did 10 years ago when the perfect storm formed.

“(Officials) were aware. They knew the potential was here. And all the conditions came together,” he said, referring to heavy wind, a cigarette and a preceding dry winter with drought-like spring. “But one benefit to Lake Tahoe of having a fire here is the access to international resources. They moved the resources quickly. And I think there were lessons learned for the local fire departments.”

On July 2, 2002, the winds were whipping and the town was filling up with tourists for the Fourth of July holiday as the

12:30pm call came from dispatch. Crews raced over to Montreal Road and negotiated the rocky terrain up the gondola line. Part of the territory is now home to the nation's first bistate park named after rancher Jack Van Sickle. It was tough getting the water line up to the fire until one was attached at Keller Road and trucks were brought up to the blaze from a South Tahoe Public Utility District service road.



The scar of the Gondola Fire  
10 years later.

“We needed a continual supply (of water),” Bailey said.

The unrelenting wind hurled the fire in two directions. There was a time when residents at the Saddle Road area watched intensely as it headed southwest toward their homes. They were not on mandatory evacuations, but were told to be ready.

However, the winds carried the bulk of the blaze east in a rage that spread from 2 acres to 25 in only an hour. With the amount of dry brush and trees and huge neighborhood lining the canyon, Kingsbury Grade became a hotbed of concern.

“We had small-scale wind shifts, but the predominant wind pushed it across the hill (east). That’s why it burned diagonal instead of up,” Bailey said, pointing to the swiping scar across South Lake Tahoe’s most recognizable ridge view.

Fire crews tried to conduct an “anchor and flank” to surround the fire from the back and pinch it off but “we couldn’t get

in front of it," Bailey lamented.

Instead, he knew its sporadic crowning at the top of the trees and consumption of hot-burning pine needles in a grove about halfway up the ridge east of the gondola line were going to spell trouble.

"When it flashed there, it burned more intensely. I thought: 'Now we're done'," he said.

### **Ski resort helps**

Fire crews and resources stepped into high gear as the blaze rolled into the North Bowl and Olympic chairlift areas of Heavenly's ski resort.



Kit Bailey stands at the point of origin of the Gondola Fire.

Although the danger exists with flying operations in the wind, the Lake Tahoe Airport became grand central station in terms of helicopter drops. Residents and tourists watched six helicopters take constant triangular runs between the lake, the mountain and the airport to refuel. An estimated 300,000 gallons of water from Lake Tahoe were dropped on the fire.

Beyond the ample water source, Heavenly chipped in with its own trifecta of fire suppression.

Bailey said fire crews received much help from Lake Tahoe's features of winter – Heavenly ski runs served as perfect fire breaks and the resort's snowmaking guns blew out water used in the summer for irrigation. The mountain's lakes at the East Peak and Sky areas were on standby if necessary.

Jim Larmore, who was Heavenly's snow surface director at the time, recalled the fire as a successful challenge for which emergency response plans trains twice a year. These operations plans were set in motion quickly because the ski area was forced to contend with providing a safe evacuation of 200 people who were still on the gondola. Workers quickly stopped loading riders at the base, but continued to run the lift to the end point.

"Our first thing was to get people out of harm's way," Larmore said.

From there, riders were shuttled over to the top of Kingsbury ahead of the fire and down to the Carson Valley. Highway 208 from the lake to the summit turnoff was closed to traffic.

### **Tourists taken elsewhere**

Meanwhile, the Ridge Tahoe was dealing with its own issues as the resort was situated in the direct line of the predominant fire. Between operator Resorts West's four properties at the summit, 1,500 guests among its 376 units were evacuated due to the urging of then Tahoe Douglas Fire Chief Tim Smith when asked by the Ridge's Senior Vice President Dan Garrison.



Charred trees make it hard to believe the fire was in 2002.

“The conversation lasted less than a minute,” Garrison told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The most startling reason Garrison believed the resort was in danger came when the management team met on the view deck of the clubhouse facing the lake and “ash began to land on the tabletops.” Guests were told to grab their medicine and leave their food because “there is no time.” Gas valves were shut off and water pumps floated in the pool.

One guest who refused to evacuate was told to provide the name of his dentist if he didn’t leave. He later obliged.

When the sky darkened from the smoke, guests shuttled by bus were leaving as fire units arrived to line Ridge Club Drive. Fire crews took over and stayed at the resort overnight, while spot fires broke out on the property.

“I remember as I drove away I looked into my rearview mirror and behind one of our buildings a large pine tree was fully engulfed with flames. I said to myself: ‘Building 10 won’t be there in the morning.’ And while it sounds dramatic, tears rolled down my cheek. I’ve been with the property before it was a property starting in 1982,” Garrison recalled.

### **Lessons Learned**

In the end, with no deaths and property damage – the Ridge executive commended his quick-thinking staff, as did Larmore of Heavenly.

The aftermath set wheels in motion in fire prevention and recovery efforts.

No smoking signs were erected throughout Heavenly’s property.

More fire hydrants and valves were installed with the ability to run a 2,500-foot water hose from the gondola mid-station down the mountain. The gondola cars were equipped with plastic plates over windows that do not allow cigarettes to be dropped out.

The community and agencies have planted trees, including a major effort put on by Heavenly and the Sugar Pine Foundation last October for Vail Resorts' annual Echo Day. Volunteers placed more than 1,000 seedlings in the ground over a 10-acre span in the Van Sickle Bi-state Park.

"We certainly hope to see these newly planted sugar pine seedlings thriving 100 years from now," Heavenly's General Manager Pete Sonntag said in a statement released last fall.

A quarter of the gondola fire burned in the California Tahoe Conservancy property endowed by Van Sickle to build the state park.

"In a way, the rocky nature of the gondola burn is a small blessing," CTC's top forester Brian Hirt admitted to *Lake Tahoe News*.

He explained how having less highly flammable chaparral growth in the rocks has allowed the new, small trees to grow faster. Usually, the overabundance of the underbrush hinders the tree growth.

"The good news is that there are quite a few trees establishing in the gondola burn, but the bad news is that the scar will take longer to appear healed," Hirt said, adding the area is also "prone to erosion."

The CTC pledged to continue to work with Nevada State Parks – the agency that spearheaded the opening of the 725-acre, day-use park. Much faith and love has gone into the building and restoration of the park, including a Lake Tahoe Stewardship Day that brought out people from many walks of life to

participate in the burn-area cleanup.

The fire consumed 243 acres in Nevada and 17 of the Conservancy's property designated for the park.

The day of the fire, CTC's program analyst Bruce Eisner was preparing to tour the area with this reporter and instead found himself watching the blaze roar over the ridge from the Saddle Road area.

"Whoever threw the cigarette out of the gondola knew absolutely nothing about this bistate park," he said.

Eisner said he was never concerned the fire would douse the hopes of the park forming as planned.

"I grew up in Southern California, so I'm well aware of how fast fire moves. But this was a first in being the closest I've come to a wildland fire," he said.