

Massive thinning project creates healthy Tahoe forest

By Kathryn Reed

FALLEN LEAF LAKE – Sunlight shines into campsites like never before. Piles of logs are scattered about the South Shore. Burn piles are dotting the landscape. Open space where trees once stood are visible from Camp Richardson to Fallen Leaf Lake.

All of this is the result of the multi-million dollar, multi-year, multi-acre South Shore Fuels Reduction Project the U.S. Forest Service started last month. The goal is to wrap up the work at the Fallen Leaf Lake Campground this month so campers are not impacted two seasons in a row.

But weather has been a problem. Four days last week the crews had to quit early because of the fire danger – the humidity level and temperature combined created hazardous conditions.



By the time the South Shore Fuels Reduction Project is done, more than 10,000 acres will have been treated. Photos/Kathryn Reed

“The big problem here is people are not considerate and are not obeying closure notices,” Robert Guebard, who is overseeing the operation for the Forest Service, told *Lake Tahoe News* last week on a tour of the site.

People have taken down signs – which presents a dangerous situation for others entering an area they don’t know is off-limits.

Even though the Lahontan Water Quality Control Board issued a permit for this project in the spring, that oversight agency requested more detailed plans. Those were handed over in late May, but Lahontan didn’t furnish the go-ahead permit until September. That is why the USFS got such a late start this season.

Of the 10,100 acres that will be treated, 6,000 will be hand thinned, while 4,100 acres will be mechanically treated. Slope, access and wetlands are the main factors that necessitate hand thinning. The Twin Peaks area is an example of this.

For the rest of the month, crews will be at Fallen Leaf Lake with what looks like oversized Tonka toys. One machine fells the trees, strips off the limbs and cuts it to a specific length before piling the logs for the next machine. The next apparatus lifts the logs into an open bed truck of sorts that has a massive “arm” to lift the wood into piles at the landing site.

The Sierra Nevada Framework, a document from more than 10 years ago, prevents trees with a diameter of 30 or more inches from being felled. The U.S. Forest Service team is not always appreciative of what can seem like an arbitrary rule. A half dead fir must be left behind near the road that leads from the campground to Fallen Leaf Lake. It’s too big to fell even though it’s not healthy.

Fallen Leaf also has archaeological sites and historic sites,

like old flumes, where thinning is prohibited.

CTL Forest Management out of Placerville is doing the work. It will be up to CTL where the wood goes – whether for commercial use, biomass or firewood.

“These guys are at the whim of the market. Right now the biomass market has tanked. That’s why you see big burn piles,” Guebard explained.

While it looks like a significant logging operation is taking place in the Lake Tahoe Basin, the reality is it’s a massive thinning process.

The goal is in 10 years the South Shore will be a healthy forest when it comes to how dense it is, the ladder fuels that are gone, the tree canopy, the size and variety of trees left. Fire used to take care of all of this naturally. But with people living in the woods, fire suppression is the norm. That means forests need help to be healthy.

The goal is to have treated 1,100 before snow brings the operation to a standstill this fall. Camp Rich is done for the year. The Railroad Grade trail by Powerline is being worked on now.

Next year the Sierra Tract-Golden Bear area, and South Upper Truckee by Hawley Grade will be treated.

Maintenance will be ongoing so the forest doesn’t end up like it is today – overgrown and prone to a severe wildfire. It’s possible prescribed ground fires will be used down the road to keep the forest healthy.

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