

Opinion: Feds strangled the Nevada Fire Safe Council

By Elwood L. Miller

The dangerous fire season 2013 is well under way with dozens of large fires burning across the West driving people from their neighborhoods and reducing their homes to ashes. However, a critical ally in the mission to protect homes and communities throughout Nevada and the Lake Tahoe Basin is noticeably absent. One of this nation's most effective community protection organizations, the Nevada Fire Safe Council, is nowhere to be seen. What happened?

With enthusiastic support of firefighting and emergency personnel, the Nevada Fire Safe Council was created in 1999 to bring citizens into a working partnership to achieve both enhanced community protection and firefighter safety. For well over a decade, the Nevada Fire Safe Council organized over 5,000 volunteers in 135 community chapters to increase defensible space and create thousands of acres of fuel breaks where firefighters could aggressively, but safely fight the flames. In national and international conferences the Nevada Fire Safe Council was repeatedly hailed as the model for unparalleled accomplishment in the arena of community protection.

In the summer 2011 a federal investigation into a fallacious complaint inadvertently revealed missteps in the council's management of grant funds. Upon notification, the council's volunteer board of directors took immediate action to address the financial tracking and control deficiencies. Follow-up investigations by no less than 15 federal agents relentlessly rifled through every financial document and file never finding anything other than a lack of adherence to the complexity of federal rules and procedures. No money was found to be

missing. During these repetitious inquiries the council's citizen volunteers responded to every question and fulfilled every demand for information. Every dollar received by the council was spent to advance the mission of community protection. However, final reports did reveal inadequate oversight and a lack of proper control on the part of the federal agencies that actually facilitated the errors and made the agencies complicit in the failings of the council.

Both the Nevada State office of the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service office at Lake Tahoe reacted to the investigations by refusing to release approved funds resulting in financial starvation and a filing for bankruptcy as the coup-de-grace for the Fire Safe Council. Refusal to release funds also stranded 51 contractors with \$3.4 million in unpaid, legitimate invoices. Many of these contractors represent small companies that in turn, were forced into bankruptcy. Unpaid invoices causing continuing hardship were also held by fire districts forcing a reduction firefighting capacity.

Both the BLM and the US Forest Service failed to honor their commitments to preserve the Council and its network of community leaders and dedicated citizen volunteers. Reasonable people freed from bureaucratic fetters with a common mission to protect communities could have reached a workable solution. Bankruptcy proceedings are now stalled after incessant delays. Nevada's congressional delegation tried to help but to no avail. It is very sad that the Gordian knot consisting of finger pointing and a tortuous web of rules and regulations took precedent over community safety. Nevada has lost its highly acclaimed and singularly successful grass roots preemptive firefighting entity. Evidently the Nevada Fire Safe Council's extraordinary record of success was not deemed worthy of an effort to untie the knot.

Elwood L. Miller was the executive director of the Nevada Fire Safe Council from January 2002 until April 2005.