

Now is not the time to be lax about wildfires

By Gwen Ernst-Ulrich

In spite of last weekend's weather that caused 10 small lightning-ignited fires across all four Tahoe National Forest ranger districts, the majority of the 76 reported fires on the TNF since the beginning of 2013 have been either human-caused or of undetermined origin, prompting officials to urge everyone to use extra caution to prevent uncontrolled wildfires, especially as drying weather patterns increase fire danger.

Human activity ranging from debris burns, equipment heat or sparks, juvenile mischief, and unmanaged campfires are some of this year's specific actions that have caused crews, engines, and other resources to race to the scene of a fire start. Even though fewer campers are enjoying the forest now that summer is ending, fall brings hunters along with those who like to gather firewood or ride off-highway vehicles, all of which are activities that could cause a fire.

Sparks or heat from equipment are leading wildfire causes. People can prevent these types of fires by following a few principles.

- Make sure equipment and off-road vehicles, such as chainsaws, portable generators, and all-terrain vehicles, have a working spark arrester.
- When touring the forest in a vehicle, including trucks, motorcycles, and so on, stay in designated areas and on established roads and trails to avoid exposing your vehicle's hot parts to dry vegetation.
- Sparks from dragging chains and flat tires can also ignite

nearby dry grasses.

Improperly handling stoves, lanterns, and heaters in the forest can also cause wildfires.

- When filling, place them on the ground in a cleared area and move the appliance to a new clearing before lighting it.
- Recap and store flammable liquid containers in a safe place.
- Never light lanterns or stoves inside a tent, trailer, or camper.

People should follow a few simple rules to reduce the risk of an escaped campfire.

- Stay with your campfire at all times.
- Always keep water nearby to extinguish uncontrolled flames.
- Before leaving the area, thoroughly douse your campfire with water and mix (stir) the water in with ashes and embers to ensure the fire is completely out.

Careless smoking in the forest is another wildfire danger.

- Smoke in at least a 3-foot clearing and grind out cigarettes, cigars, or pipe tobacco in the dirt.
- Do not smoke while walking or riding a horse or trail bike.
- Use your ashtray while in your vehicle.

Through the “One Less Spark, One Less Wildfire” interagency fire prevention campaign, the California Wildland Fire Coordinating Group is working to raise awareness, and agencies, businesses, and Fire Safe councils across the state are engaged and supporting this effort. More information is available on the Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region’s website.

“Everyone pays the cost of uncontrolled wildfires,” said Tahoe National Forest Supervisor Tom Quinn. “The costs come in the form of lost lives and damaged or destroyed property and natural resources in addition to tax dollars that could be used for efforts other than fighting fires.”

Quinn encourages people to be aware of wildfire conditions and to take appropriate prevention measures while helping protect their own property by creating defensible space around their homes.

For more fire prevention information, go to the Tahoe National Forest website or the Forest Service National website.

Gwen Ernst-Ulrich works for the Tahoe National Forest.