

Lahontan looking at easing forestry work rules

By Kathryn Reed

Regulating the size of a burn pile and testing the moisture content of soil are some of the rules that are proposed to go by the wayside when Lahontan Regional Water Quality Board revises the timber waiver in 2014.

The board on Nov. 14 heard an update from Doug Cushman, senior engineer, about proposed changes to the 2009 document. The waiver must be re-examined every five years.

Lahontan only has say over matters in California.

While there have been changes to the timber waiver since it was adopted, this would be the first time any changes would be made to the monitoring segment.



Proposed timber waiver changes would affect burn piles. Photo/LTN file

The forms are all online and are a bit cumbersome. They will be streamlined to make it easier for reporting agencies to comply with the rules.

In the coming months Lahontan staff will meet with entities

that must comply with the timber waiver. The goal is to bring to the board a document that will not be opposed by outside agencies. The board is likely to take the matter up in April.

The timber waiver can apply to any agency removing trees or burning slash piles. Mostly it's large projects like the U.S. Forest Service's multi-year South Shore Fuels Reduction Project and work in stream environmental zones that are under the extra scrutiny.

Cushman admitted the process to test soil cut into the time period agencies could do work. The current policy requires digging a hole, seeing how moist the dirt is and comparing it to a detailed chart.

"We call this the squeeze test. It's been problematic over time," Cushman said. "There is tremendous variability."

He also said it is staff intensive, requires soil scientists and can be subjective.

The proposed change would be a more visual analysis. If rutting occurs, the soil is too wet to do the work.

Martin Goldberg with Lake Valley Fire Protection District told the board how a stream area project his department just did had substantial cost overruns because of the current procedures that are in place.

"Pulling slash out of an SEZ is labor intensive and cost prohibitive," Goldberg said.

Cushman said the goal of the changes is to move from prescriptive mandates – as in rigid rules before the work is done; to performance based – meaning looking at the end product to determine if what was done worked.

"Research shows size doesn't affect soil," Kathy Murphy, with the U.S. Forest Service, said in regards to burn piles. Current Lahontan policy is to regulate the size of piles.

What matters is if the soil is damaged. Burning seeds and sterilizing the soil are bad.

Part of the problem agencies have with Lahontan's rules is the layer of redundancy. Water quality is already a concern of most who are doing this type of work. But Lahontan also provides a checks-and-balances so someone is looking over the shoulders of the agencies.

"If left on our own, we would protect water quality with our own practices," Murphy told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Lahontan and the Forest Service have had many differences in the past, but the two leaders and now the staff are making peace. While they each have a different purpose, there is a growing respect that each has a job to do.

"The public is better served if people are getting along. Sparring takes too much energy," Forest Supervisor Nancy Gibson told *Lake Tahoe News*.

She said the timber waiver has forced her agency to look at how it was doing business and in turn changes were made to be more efficient.

The Lahontan board unanimously told staff the performance approach was a better way of doing business.