

Arson dog helping track Tahoe fire starter

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – With an arsonist on the loose on the South Shore setting brush fires, Simmie is even more important.

Simmie is Lake Valley Fire Protection District's arson dog. She was at the Soroptimist International South Lake Tahoe lunch on Wednesday at Harrah's Lake Tahoe with her handler Gareth Harris.

Harris, fire chief for Lake Valley, has been working with Simmie for a couple years. She came to the department via a donation from a nonprofit. And she is the only arson dog that services Northern Nevada.



Firefighters on June 18 hike to a blaze in Stateline that was intentionally set. Photo/Carol Faccinetti

“There is no doubt it was started with an accelerant,” Harris said of one of the Stateline area fires.

Simmie is trained to sniff out hydrocarbons. Samples are then sent to a lab in Sacramento for confirmation.

Multiple agencies are working to track down the person or people setting the local fires, with a task force convening on Monday.

While the basin has not had many arsons, three people were arrested earlier this month in connection with starting a fire at an Incline Village restaurant, the January house fire in South Lake Tahoe was the work of an arsonist who has not been caught, and in October 2012 a South Lake Tahoe man was arrested on charges of arson at a residence. And of course there is the Angora Fire of 2007 that, while not deemed intentional, was started by someone not extinguishing an illegal campfire.

According to the South Lake Tahoe Fire Department, arson killed more than 800 people in 2012 and was the largest single cause of fire damage to property.

Harris explained how it wasn't until the 1980s that arson dogs came into vogue. Bomb and drug sniffing dogs had been used long before that.

He said Labradors, like Simmie, have 4,000 times more powerful noses than humans. Simmie trains by searching for a piece of cloth that has one drop of gasoline on it. The cloth is in a prescription bottle that is then placed in a Tupperware container.

Instead of pawing at the evidence, she sits when she finds something. She makes eye contact with Harris and then uses her nose to point to where the accelerant is located. This way she does not use her paw to contaminate the scene.

The other part of the July 23 talk focused on defensible space, and the increased need for it this year with the risk of fire escalating every day the drought lingers. Plus, it's the law in California to have defensible space.

Leona Allen, who works for Lake Valley, said 75 percent of the

houses in the Angora burn area that had defensible space survived.

While there are rules about what is allowed at certain distances from a structure, the main test is think about throwing a softball-size ember anywhere on your property. Would it catch fire? If, yes, you need better defensible space, Allen said.

More info about defensible space may be found online.