

Opinion: Working together for wildfire protection

By Cheva Gabor

September brought the reality of wildfires to the forefront in the Lake Tahoe Basin. The King Fire came within eight air miles of the U.S. Forest Service Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit boundary, and as we all anxiously awaited its containment, the Cascade Fire broke out in the Desolation Wilderness.

Rain and snow quickly brought an end to both fires, but not before we were all sharply reminded of the risk we take by choosing to live surrounded by forest. Perhaps, as you anxiously monitored firefighters' progress against the wildfires, you asked the question, "What are Lake Tahoe agencies doing to reduce the risk of a wildfire that could affect my home and family?"



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The answer should come as a pleasant surprise. Since 2007, Lake Tahoe Basin agencies have worked closely together to prioritize and implement projects to reduce local wildfire risks, under the guidance of the Tahoe Fire & Fuels Team, using the Lake Tahoe Basin Multi-Jurisdictional Fuel Reduction and Wildfire Prevention Strategy. Participating agencies include the U.S. Forest Service, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, the land managers and fire services of California and

Nevada and local fire protection districts.

In August 2014, the 15 agencies released an updated strategy that assesses the work done to date and sets forth a plan for the future.

At this year's Lake Tahoe Summit, elected officials from both parties recognized the significance of this collaborative approach, signing a proclamation supporting the strategy and its benefits to forest health and the protection of life, property, and Lake Tahoe's precious environmental resources.

The origins of the fuels reduction strategy date to 2006, when Congress passed the White Pine Amendment to the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act (SNPLMA). The bill required Lake Tahoe Basin partners to develop priorities for fuels reduction in order to compete for SNPLMA funding to implement these projects.

Led by the U.S. Forest Service, the agencies rallied and began to build upon existing research, planning and treatment to prioritize future work. Then, in June of 2007, the Angora Fire burned 3,100 acres and 254 homes, pointing up the urgent need to treat wildland areas near communities as outlined in the strategy. Since it was finalized in December 2007, the document has fulfilled its goal of guiding wildfire risk reduction efforts.

The original strategy identified 68,000 acres as treatment priorities. Since 2008, nonfederal partners have treated 12,000 acres in the highest priority areas identified by the community wildfire protection plans, nearly doubling the average annual number of acres previously treated. The U.S. Forest Service has treated approximately 26,000 acres.

In 2013, the Forest Service convened the partners to update the strategy to address new issues and challenges that have arisen since 2007. The update responds to climate change, ensures coordination with national wildland fire policy, and

addresses the loss of markets for biomass and other wood products that result from forest thinning.

Treating fuels in the critical area where our communities meet the wildland is projected to cost between \$144 million and \$156 million, with an additional \$25 million to \$35 million needed for work to ensure the continued effectiveness of previously treated areas. These amounts far exceed our agencies' normal budgets. Our strategic approach will help us better compete for the funding we need to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

While not mentioned by name, there's one last partner we need to successfully implement the strategy – you. The updated strategy recognizes the essential role that you as a property owner play in reducing wildfire risk when you complete your defensible space or retrofit your home so it's more resistant to ignition by wildfire. To learn more about what you can do, go online.

The updated strategy facilitates the decisions that must be made by land management, fire and regulatory agencies to reduce the probability of another catastrophic wildfire in the Lake Tahoe Basin. The full commitment by partner agencies to support and implement the strategy will help protect our communities, our beautiful environment and the tourism-based economy that relies on it.

To read the Multi-Jurisdictional Fuel Reduction and Wildfire Prevention Strategy, go online.

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