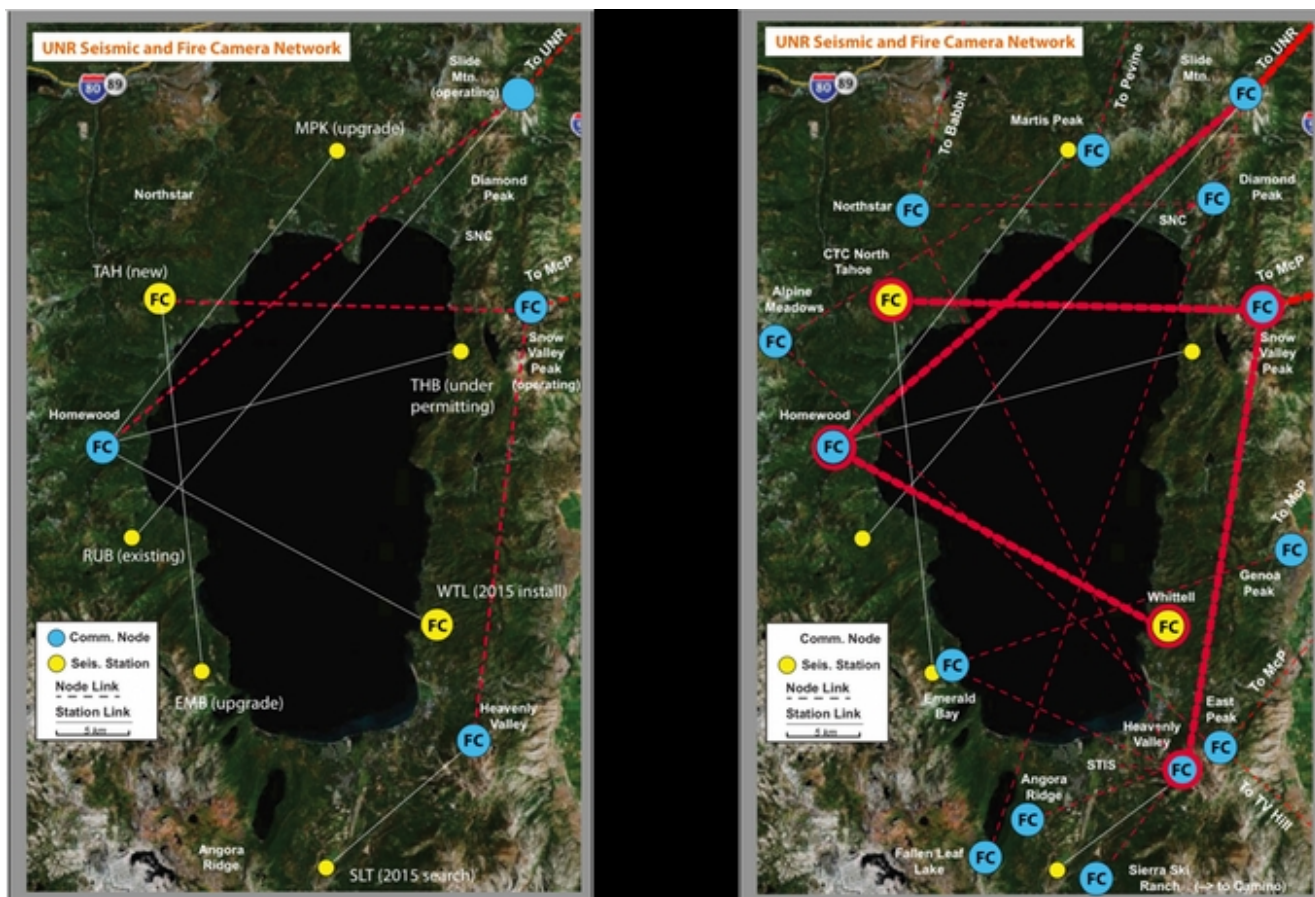


Fire cameras could prevent devastation in basin



Left: Pilot program cameras; right: camera network when the system is built out. Images/UNR

By Kathryn Reed

INCLINE VILLAGE – If the fire alert system that is in its infancy in the Lake Tahoe Basin had been in place in 2007, the Angora Fire might not have wiped out 254 homes on the South Shore.

That is the prediction of Graham Kent, a South Tahoe High School graduate who is now the state seismologist for Nevada. He gave a talk Jan. 8 at the Tahoe Center for Environmental Sciences about AlertTahoe, the fire camera system that is being developed in Tahoe.

That same day the newest camera – at Homewood Mountain Resort – came online. Other cameras are at Snow Valley Peak, Angel's Roost at Heavenly Mountain Resort, and on California Tahoe Conservancy property in North Lake Tahoe. A permit is secured to place a camera above Whittell High School, but there is no money to do so.

"Angora would be easy to control under a system like this," Kent told the group.

The problem with Angora was dispatchers in Truckee believed it was a controlled burn and didn't direct resources to the wildland fire in a timely manner. These cameras would have shown that smoke was no control burn. Plus, officials are working to put information on the website that identifies prescribed burns.

There was a time when people said a massive fire could not burn in the Sierra. The Rim and King fires prove that theory wrong. Had the winds changed, last September's King Fire would have easily entered the basin at Tahoma.

Kent showed time lapsed images of the King Fire smoke that was captured on one of the cameras.

"You're looking at stands of trees blowing up," he said, as there would be a burst of smoke.

At one point flames are visible. (Video is in HD and 4K, with infrared capability.) The cameras can be moved to get a wider or zoomed in view.

On July 29 a camera picked up smoke on Mount Pluto at Northstar that neither CalFire nor the U.S. Forest Service was aware of. A storm came through to douse those flames. On Aug. 9 a tree was on fire north of Spooner. Officials knew about it because of a camera. The fire was kept to a half acre.

"That's the point of the system. We find them, knock them down

and make them small," Kent said.

The Sept. 24 Cascade Fire allowed officials to see what a small fire looks like at night.

The U.S. Forest Service used to use fire lookouts to spot fires. These cameras are the modern day version of those lookouts – only much better. Fire agencies and the public may view them online.

The cameras are also used by UNR scientists to study earthquakes and floods. But as Kent pointed out, the cameras cannot change the size of those disasters. The cameras can help contain a fire.

An effort is under way to raise \$2 million – in public and private dollars – in the next decade to be able to install more cameras, as well as to keep up with the maintenance and operation.

It cost \$160 million to fight the Angora Fire, and at just more than 3,000 acres, that was a small fire. Angora was 1 to 3 percent of the size of the Rim and King fires.

With the snowpack diminishing in the Sierra and climate change taking hold, Kent said, "It is a very poor time to sit back and let fire happen."

He said one fire could wipe out all of the \$3 billion in environmental improvements that have been made in the basin since the 1990s.

The program continues to evolve. AlertTahoe is working with BLM to show two weeks worth of lightning strikes. If people think they see smoke from a fire, that location could be matched with where the lightning occurred. A Twitter feed, that will be activated this spring, will be geared toward spreading AlertTahoe info to the masses. The ability to show longitude and latitude identifiers for fires is in the works.

And the website interface is being expanded.

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Notes:

- For more info or to help fund the project, go online.