

Opinion: Drought makes wildfire more of a threat

By Joanne Marchetta

It's Wildfire Awareness Month at Tahoe, and with the summer tourist season around the corner, we must all remember that drought has left our region with severely dry forest conditions and an extreme risk of wildfire. This summer we need to think about "when" not "if" another fire will happen. All of us have important roles to play in preventing the next wildfire, and in making sure our homes, families, and communities are prepared for it.

The ongoing drought has brought unprecedented warm, dry weather to much of the American West, and California's drought is like none we have ever seen. It is the most severe in California's recorded history, and according to some scientists, may be the most severe drought California has experienced in more than 1,000 years. Hundreds, if not thousands of communities, including our own, are at increased risk of wildfire.



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The winter of 2014-15 was the warmest ever recorded in California, breaking a record set the previous winter. April snowpack was also at a record low, measuring just 5 percent of average in the Sierra Nevada and just 3 percent of average at

Lake Tahoe. Now entering its fourth year, the drought shows no sign of ending and has already brought the driest three consecutive years ever recorded for statewide precipitation.

Drought is taking a toll on California's forests as well as its dwindling water supplies for farmers and cities. Experts have been reporting exceptionally dry forest conditions at Lake Tahoe this spring that normally would not be seen until mid-summer or later. Trees are stressed and mortality from bark beetle outbreaks is expected to spread throughout the Sierra.

Notably, more than half of California's 20 largest wildfires have occurred during years of drought. The massive Rim and King fires that burned in the Sierra in recent years show how catastrophic wildfires can grow out of control and devastate tens if not hundreds of thousands of acres in areas where hazardous fuels have built up. The Angora Fire at Lake Tahoe in 2007 showed us how even comparatively small wildfires, at least when compared to the Rim and King fires, can wreak havoc in short order, charring 3,100 acres, destroying 254 homes and structures, and causing \$150 million in property damage.

Government agencies and fire protection districts within the Lake Tahoe region have been collaborating and working together for years to reduce the risk of a catastrophic wildfire, and that work remains a top priority. Last August, TRPA and other members of the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team updated the Multi-Jurisdictional Fuel Reduction and Wildfire Prevention Strategy, a blueprint to improve the safety of our communities and the health of our forests.

More than 55,690 acres of forest in the Lake Tahoe Basin have been cleared of hazardous fuels through the Environmental Improvement Program, with more than 36,890 acres treated since 2008. More projects continue this spring, and our Region is on track to meet targets to reduce hazardous fuel loads in the roughly 117,000 acres of wildland urban interface in the Tahoe

Basin where our communities and our forests meet.

All private properties in wildland urban interface areas at Lake Tahoe need to create adequate defensible space by 2020. It's an ambitious goal, but entire neighborhoods are stepping up, creating defensible space, clearing hazardous fuels, and installing fire breaks for improved community protection. Your participation can make the goal achievable.

Fire protection districts are inspecting properties for defensible space, educating residents about the importance of wildfire preparedness, and holding evacuation drills this spring so residents are as ready as they can be for the next wildfire.

TRPA works collaboratively with regional fire officials to reduce our wildfire risks. That means we're continuing to educate the community about the importance of creating defensible space on private properties and implementing fire adapted community concepts so our homes and businesses are as fire-resistant and prepared as possible.

People must be vigilant reporting wildfires so they can be put out quickly when they are small. Webcams at Alert Tahoe are making citizen vigilance possible. Report anything of concern to fire officials. People must also be responsible with any activities that could start a fire while out recreating on our region's treasured public lands. Illegal campfires start more than 90 percent of the wildfires on public lands at Lake Tahoe, and caused the devastating Rim and Angora fires. Curtailing that one preventable human cause of wildfire, while also better preparing our own properties, would significantly improve our odds this wildfire season. And let's not forget about the Gondola Fire at Lake Tahoe in 2002, when the careless toss of one lit cigarette started a blaze that destroyed nearly 700 acres. The scar of that fire remains visible more than a decade later, and we can all take responsibility to remind locals and visitors alike of these

preventable actions.

The reality is that wildfire risk will remain with us regardless of drought. We live in a region that is prone to wildfire as a natural process, and that hazard is only expected to increase with climate change, making it more important than ever for all of us to be vigilant, be responsible, and work together now to be prepared.

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