

USFS concerned nasty fire season approaching

By Kathryn Reed

Despite the rains this month, it's dry out there and will just get worse now that 70-degree days have returned. This has agencies on heightened alert in what is expected to be a dangerous fire season.

U.S. Forest Service firefighters are reporting to work three weeks earlier than normal.

"Every day we get a reprieve with the weather, it buys us more time. It also delays the inevitable," Kit Bailey, the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit's chief firefighter, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It gives us more time to prepare and train."

While the Forest Service is the main body dealing with wildland fires, it works in conjunction with the other fire districts in the basin, including CalFire. The mantra this season is "one less spark, one less wildfire."

Illegal campfires are something the USFS is going to have zero tolerance for.



Kit Bailey with the U.S. Forest Service has been in the firefighting business for 36 years. Photo/Kathryn Reed

“Ninety-five percent of the fires here are human caused and most are from abandoned campfires,” Bailey said. “I don’t understand it. It’s frustrating. I’ve seen numerous times where there really wasn’t an effort to put it out.”

He said building, maintaining and extinguishing a campfire is a lost art. That is why his agency puts on a program at Taylor Creek to educate people about campfires.

It was an illegal abandoned campfire that started the devastating 2007 Angora Fire, which reduced 254 houses on the outskirts of South Lake Tahoe to ash.

The unfortunate thing is people who have left the smoldering campfires are seldom caught and even when they are it’s a hard case to prosecute.

While the entire Western United States is in a drought, California is at the “exceptional” level – making it at the top of the chart. Nevada isn’t much better off.

While staffing is always an issue, the agency has more people on the ground enforcing the rules, and will have access to numerous people to patrol the basin and backcountry during Fourth of July weekend.

Bailey is concerned, though, that there will be multiple fires at once that will stretch the firefighting ranks to the point that a fire will not be well staffed. Locally, the USFS has a cadre of on-call firefighters to call. Plus, there are the local government agency crews who have wildland experience. They were all used during Angora. The Forest Service is also training California Conservation Corps members to be a type two hand crew.

“The best way to fight a fire is to prevent it,” Bailey said. Education is one form of prevention. All fire agencies are doing their part to get the message out about the need to be diligent when it comes to all things fire related. The problem, as Bailey points out, is that often the people who need to hear the message most aren’t listening.

He said homeowners can start by making their residences less susceptible to fire. The Living with Fire website provides a wealth of information. Bailey believes the built zone – using flame resistant materials – is more important than defensible space.

When people see smoke, it’s imperative they call 911. The theory is that it’s better to get multiple calls than no call.

The fire cameras that are gradually being installed around the basin are another tool agencies can use.

It’s possible fire restrictions will go in place earlier than most years. June 15 is the likely date. The rules impact campfires, smoking and off roading. (The 2002 Gondola Fire was started from a cigarette being thrown from the Heavenly gondola.)

The forest is being stressed with the lack of moisture, which makes it more susceptible to a wildfire. The trees haven't had enough to drink since this is year four of the drought.

"We are seeing a significant amount of tree mortality in the southern Sierra. It's doubling every year," Bailey said. A dead tree is more fuel for a wildfire.

The Forest Service has models to measure the fuel moisture content of trees. It should be in the 20s now, but it's only in the teens.

"It's a good indicator of what the season will look like," Bailey said – hot, dry and prone to fire.