

Drought an issue for governors in West



Forest Schafer with North Lake Tahoe fire on June 25 talks about how the drought is increasing the risk of a forest fire. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

INCLINE VILLAGE – While people were in awe of the setting of the Western Governors’ Association gathering on Thursday, the reality is that in a non-drought year it would never have been able to be there.

The group assembled June 25 at the boat ramp at Sand Harbor. The ramp never opened this season because the water level at Lake Tahoe is too low for motorized vessels to launch.

Officials at the meeting said the level is at 6,220 feet. The natural rim is 6,223 feet. The dam in Tahoe City allows for another 6.1 feet of water above the rim to be stored in Lake Tahoe. Without much of a spring runoff because of the dismal

winter snowpack, the lake has been dropping since the May rains ceased. Plus, about 0.1 inches is lost every day to evaporation. According to the Tahoe Fund, that evaporated water could serve the daily needs of 3.3 million people in the United States.

Cave Rock is the only launch ramp open in Nevada; even so, only one of the two lanes is accessible.

Much of the Western United States is suffering from drought – it's not just California and Nevada.

Gov. Brian Sandoval is chairman of the Western Governors' Association, having chosen drought to be his focus.

"We have to work together in this time of catastrophic drought," the Nevada governor said.

Several people attending the multiday conference at the Hyatt in Incline Village went on a tour Thursday of the area, which highlighted the effects of drought in Tahoe. Besides the governors and their staffs, people from federal agencies and private companies that work with them were in attendance.



Motor boats cannot access Sand Harbor's boat launch area because the water is so low.

Bob Mergell, deputy administrator for Nevada Division of State

Parks, said parks are losing visitors because boaters are going elsewhere. To compensate his department is ramping up its efforts to attract non-motorized watercraft.

And while the low lake level means there is more beach area, not all of it is pristine.

“It’s a hard battle with noxious weeds,” Mergell said.

Fire is another threat all landowners are having to contend with as the drought stresses trees, making them more susceptible to beetle infestation. Plus, they are thirsty, which dries them out and makes them more prone to being wiped out if flames were to reach them.

Under increasingly smoky skies from the Washington Fire burning near Markleeville, a trio of fire officials spoke to the group from along Tunnel Creek Road – the same dirt path Flume Trail mountain bike riders descend.

“It looks like one forest, but politically it is very complex,” explained Forest Schafer with North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District.

Collaboration to treat areas has been critical so there is a uniform approach to managing the forest, he said.

Roland Shaw with the Nevada Division of Forestry said the biggest thing the May rains did was to accelerate the growth of cheat grass that will dry out and add fuel to the forest.

He said evidence of bark beetle infestations are starting to show, something he expects to become worse as it spreads to various species of trees.

“Fire historically has been the great equalizer,” Shaw said. “Today, fire is getting the reputation as the great eraser, not the great equalizer. It’s making the restoration of sites more difficult.”

He said how Tunnel Creek usually has water in it into June if not July. It's been dry for a couple years. No water means vegetation is less – especially berries that bears like to dine on. There is less protein in plants.

All of this means wildlife is looking for food and water in other places. It could mean in Incline having to cross Highway 28 to get to Lake Tahoe as a drinking source. It means human garbage becomes even more attractive.



Idaho Gov. Butch Otter, right, talks about what his state is doing to fight fires.

While agencies are working to thin the forest to make it healthier and less susceptible to fire, Brian Garrett with the U.S. Forest Service lamented that the policy stating trees larger than 30 inches in diameter cannot be cut down is hindering the agency from meeting its goals.

Leaving more of the larger trees per acre than the feds would like is putting stress on them, which in turn makes them ripe to be infested by beetles. Plus, the larger the tree, the more water it needs to stay alive.

Fire is inevitable the officials said. Suppression will be difficult in places where stands are denser. The Washington Fire in Alpine County is a prime example of this.

Idaho Gov. Butch Otter said his state has been using rural fire protection (RFP) districts for the past six years. This program allows ranchers to fight fires.

“Those guys are the ones who know the land,” Otter said.

He said each of the RFPs cost about \$150,000 to start. They are helping to protect more than 3 million acres.

The RFPs are growing in popularity because of the stress on traditional firefighting agencies in terms of money and manpower. With the fire season starting earlier, lasting longer and being more prolific – especially in drought-prone locales, non-traditional measures and personnel are being deployed to douse the flames.