Response to Washington Fire questioned

Updated June 24 10:03pm:

"Fire is burning in hazardous and inaccessible terrain and approaching an increasing number of structures and impacting travel corridors," authorities report.

Updated June 24 6:19pm:

The fire has grown to 17,205 acres and is 10 percent contained.

There are now 900 people fighting the fire that was started by lightning.

Warmer temperatures are expected through Saturday, with a possible record high on Friday. Thunderstorms are forecast for Saturday and Sunday. The moisture would be helpful, but the threat of more lightning is worrisome to fire agencies throughout the area.

Updated June 24 8:40am:

Firefighters have 5 percent containment of the Washington Fire. The acreage burned is 16,544. Nearly 700 people are now fighting the fire.

By Kathryn Reed and Susan Wood

People who live and work in the area are raising questions about the response time of the Washington Fire.

The initial response was June 19 at 7pm, according to fire officials. By Saturday night the fire was at 350 acres, by Sunday night the acreage consumed was 6,500, by Monday night it reached 14,942 acres and as of Tuesday evening the burned

area is 16,543 acres.

"The fire was reported at noon to 1 on Friday. There were no winds until Saturday. No one did anything about it. There are a variety of things they could have done. Well, that's Alpine County for you," Tom Abdoo, Markleeville property and business owner, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

U.S. Forest Service spokesman Larry Lucas said the Forest Service took over the fire at 6am June 22. He has asked local authorities for a time line detailing the response to the fire.

Lightning started the fire, the wind then spread it.

Smoke fills the drive into Carson City via Spooner Summit on June 23. Photo/Susan Wood

However, the fire is burning on Forest Service land in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest so the feds should have had

authority the entire time.

A Forest Service employee told *Lake Tahoe News* their firehouses are not staffed around the clock during the fire season.

Alpine County itself is serviced by a volunteer fire department.

Any delay in getting resources to the fire could have been the result of who was notified first. People don't tend to call the USFS dispatch. Instead, they call 911. Which dispatch center that call goes to depends on the nearest cell tower to the caller.

In 2007 during the start of the Angora Fire the 911 calls went to CHP dispatch in Truckee which at first told everyone it was a controlled burn and not to worry.

The weather conditions on that June 24 were very similar to this past weekend's — high winds and low humidity. These conditions had been in the forecast, with the National Weather Service having issued alerts about red flag days for the entire weekend.

With Angora, 254 houses were reduced to ash in a matter of hours. With the Washington Fire, 15 buildings are in imminent danger and the town of Markleeville is threatened. Fire officials on the night of June 23, though, didn't have information about how far the flames are from this Alpine County town.

Lake Valley has sent one engine to the Washington Fire, while Tahoe Douglas has firefighters in San Bernardino.

Most of the Tahoe agencies are staying put because the local conditions warrant firefighters being on alert. The state mutual aid system is voluntary, so departments don't have to send crews if the local needs warrant staying put.

The Forest Service is using 11 helicopters, eight air tankers — including two DC-10s, 17 engines, three water tenders, and about 500 people to fight the Washington Fire. At one point the blaze was 10 percent contained, but the conditions worsened and the firefighters lost the upper hand. There is no containment this evening.

What it is costing to fight the fire each day has not been disclosed.

On a related note, Liberty Utilities has canceled the June 24 and July 1 planned power outage for parts of Alpine County because of the fire. The outage was scheduled to allow crews to replace power poles in the area.