

Officials: Forest health, fire, water all related



Forest thinning projects help create a healthy watershed. Photo/LTN file

By Kathryn Reed

What happens in the Sierra, does not stay in the Sierra. That is the message those tasked with managing land, water and fire suppression in the mountains are trying to convey to people downstream and to politicians in Sacramento and Washington, D.C.

The goal is to change how forests are managed. In part this has to do with the U.S. Forest Service now spending more money on fire suppression than on fire prevention. Prevention – aside from education – comes in the form of thinning forests so they are healthy and less prone to a catastrophic fire. Healthy forests also allow for more water to enter the aquifers because there are fewer trees absorbing the moisture. With them spaced out more, it means more snow on the ground.

All of this is important to the Lake Tahoe Basin because the Forest Service owns about 80 percent of the land. And most of the 25 million acres in the Sierra Nevada are controlled by

the USFS, with National Parks, Bureau of Land Management and private owners making up much of the rest of the ownership puzzle.



The 2007 Angora Fire helped spur collaboration in the basin. Photo/Lake Valley Fire

Richard Solbrig, South Tahoe PUD general manager, told *Lake Tahoe News* that a comprehensive approach to the ecology of Lake Tahoe is critical.

Fires are burning hotter because of the massive amount of fuel in the forests. The mortality rate from the drought will compound that scenario. It used to be the burn rate on average was 20 percent. The Rim Fire by Yosemite was 40 percent and the King Fire by Pollock Pines was 50 percent.

“There’s a lot of landscape with too many trees. It’s not healthy. It’s not the way it was historically,” Jim Branham, executive officer of Sierra Nevada Alliance, said.

He was one of several speakers July 15 at a forum hosted by South Tahoe Public Utility District about the threat of high intensity wildfire at Lake Tahoe. The nearly 40 people in attendance represented the USFS, CalFire, most fire districts in the basin, Association of California Water Agencies, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, League to Save Lake Tahoe, Tahoe

Fund, Tahoe Resource Conservation District, staff from the offices of Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dean Heller and Reps. Mark Amodei and Tom McClintock, and others.



Jerry Brown on April 1 stands in a field by Sierra-at-Tahoe that should be covered in snow. Photo/Susan Wood

“It took the drought for the governor to stand in a meadow and see the significance of the Sierra,” Branham pointed out. This was in reference to when Jerry Brown attended the last snow survey at Echo Summit this spring.

With the majority of California’s potable water coming from the Sierra, the value and importance of this swath of land cannot be understated. The lack of snowfall is like turning the spigot off for the rest of the state.

The Association of California Water Agencies, which is comprised of 430 public water agencies in the state, this spring came out with a framework to improve the resiliency and management of headwaters like the Sierra.

One of the recommendations was: "Stakeholders should invest and participate in landscape-level research that explores water and forestry relationships, including ecological forest thinning which can have multiple benefits for water supply reliability, water quality and ecosystems."

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy this spring launched the Sierra Nevada Watershed Environmental Improvement Program. The key outcomes are to increase funding for the watersheds and identify policies that impede the process of creating a healthy watershed.

It was acknowledged that ultimately laws might need to be changed at the state or federal levels to get a better functioning system.

Money – or the lack of it – was a reoccurring theme among the speakers. While there is some disagreement on what should be done, let alone the priorities, the bigger issue is there isn't enough money for projects no matter what decisions are made.

The short-term goals of Wednesday's gathering were to get people talking and to build on collaboration that already exists.

Dennis Cocking, who is working as a consultant to South Tahoe PUD, spoke about how the water agencies in the basin have been collaborating for a number of years, especially after the 2007 Angora Fire. This has allowed the group to be able to get funding for projects. The agencies are also working so water can flow from one district to the others. It happened with Gondola Fire in 2002 and Angora.

The other immediate point was for political operatives to hear the message. This is critical with the latest version of the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act having been introduced this month. That \$415 million piece of legislation includes \$150 million for fire prevention.

