

Opinion: This is no time to be lax about fire

By Jeff Meston

Early in 2015, the U.S. Forest Service, as well as our partners at the National Weather Service, predicted this to be a significant year for wildland fires throughout the Western states.

A combination of a sustained period of drought, coupled with weather that is conducive to nearly perfect burning conditions have challenged local firefighting resources. Those predictions have rang very true as we continue to hear about new fires occurring almost daily all over the Western states. This year will go down as one of the most hazardous years for wildland fire.



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Locally, firefighters have responded to a variety of wildland fires within our region and thankfully have been able to mitigate them quickly and efficiently. Sadly, we recently lost a USFS firefighter who tragically lost his life battling an incident south of Echo Summit.

The California Fire & Rescue Mutual Aid System is the best in the world, and our agencies along with our partners in Nevada have deployed local resources to fight fires throughout California. This year our local U.S. Forest Service Lake Tahoe

Basin Management Unit obtained use of the Super Scooper, a superb firefighting plane to reinforce our ground firefighting resources, now based at the Lake Tahoe Airport. Our No. 1 goal is to prevent the ignition of wildfires, and to accomplish that, we need the public's help.

We live and play in a forest. Where are you discarding your cigarette butts? Are you parking on dry grass? Did you start a campfire in a prohibited location? Did you put it out completely? Are you burning your trash? Are you causing sparks while driving? Over 90 percent of unintended wildfire is human caused in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

If you live in or own a home in the region, have you completed your defensible space? If not, why not? Without defensible space, it is unreasonable to think that fire agencies can place a fire truck to defend your home during a wildland fire. Look around your neighborhood, how many homes are there? Is it easy or hard to gain access to your home? Are your streets wide enough for a fire truck to access the neighborhood and for you and your neighbors to pass that engine to evacuate? Firefighting resources are limited and there is not a home in existence worth a firefighter's life.

Help us to help you by following the following basic defensible space tenants.

- Vegetation surrounding a building or structure is fuel for a fire. Even the building or structure is considered fuel. Research and experience have shown that fuels reduction around a building or structure increases the probability of it surviving a wildfire. Good defensible space allows firefighters to protect and save buildings or structures safely without facing unacceptable risk to their lives. Fuels reduction through vegetation management is the key to creating good defensible space.

- Properties with greater fire hazards will require

more clearing. Clearing requirements will be greater for those lands with steeper terrain, larger and denser fuels, fuels that are highly volatile, and in locations subject to frequent fires.

- Creation of defensible space through vegetation management usually means reducing the amount of fuel around the building or structure, providing separation between fuels, and/or reshaping retained fuels by trimming.

- In all cases, fuels reduction means arranging the tree, shrubs and other fuel sources in a way that makes it difficult for fire to transfer from one fuel source to another. It does not mean cutting down all trees and shrubs, or creating a bare ring of earth across the property.

- A homeowner's defensible space clearing is limited to 100 feet away from his or her building or structure or to the property line, whichever is less, and limited to their land.

- Homeowners who complete fuel reduction activities that remove or dispose of vegetation are required to comply with all federal, state or local environmental protection laws and obtain permits when necessary.

- For more information on what homeowners can do to create defensible space around their home and property, go **online**.

Jeff Meston is fire chief of South Lake Tahoe.