

Threat of fire ignites concern in Tahoe basin



Wildfire Awareness Week in the basin runs from May 26 to June 3. Photo/Susan Wood

By Susan Wood

The Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit expects to get the Super Scooper fire-specific aircraft staged here again for good reason – California and Nevada are not out of the woods when it comes to experiencing another bad fire season.

That's the word from a number of fire agencies that protect the basin and Sierra Nevada Mountain Range every year. Just because Mother Nature provided a better, closer-to-normal winter, the moisture windfall fails to make up for four years of drought.

The shrubs, brush and small trees known in fire circles as ladder fuel to the tall pine trees do not have enough moisture in them to keep from going up in flames from a carelessly-

discarded cigarette butt or neglected campfire or lightning.

The other concern is just as devastating. The trees are getting eaten alive by bark beetles. Clumps of trees in groves all around the lake are dead, have snapped limbs and in many cases fallen to the ground. These dead and dying trees are brittle-bone dry, making them susceptible to erupting with any type of combustible.

Then, there's the double dilemma. The plants and trees are either dry from drought or the rain and snow have created more of them, hence providing additional fuel on the ground.

"We can't win with nature on that one," LTBMU acting Fire Management Officer Steve Burns told *Lake Tahoe News*.

With this multiple threat, the U.S. Forest Service isn't messing around with beefing up its resources – given the federal agency consumed half its budget last year fighting fires.

The Tahoe arm of the agency plans to be fully staffed with four engines, one hot shots 20-person crew, two 20-person hand crews on call and four prevention officers.

"We'll be at a maximum efficiency level," Burns said.

About the only saving grace in Burns' eyes lies in the water level of the reservoirs in case of fire breaking out.

"It's hard to predict what the season could bring. It's warm and dry," Burns said. "The one thing in California is trees are dying at an unprecedented rate. That has got CalFire and us and other groups looking at that."



Tree mortality in the basin adds to fire concerns. Photo/Susan Wood

Being smarter

The Forest Service will begin aerial surveys to look at the tree mortality – now standing at a record high of 27.6 million trees. Aerial Survey Program Manager Jeffrey Moore discovered about 10 times more dead trees than previously recorded.

Patricia Maloney, U.C. Davis Department of Plant Pathology and Tahoe Environmental Research Center forest ecologist and conservation biologist, is talking at Sierra Nevada College on May 10 about her studies in tree species disturbances. It's slated for 6pm.

Even private business has brought assistance. PG&E has awarded \$2 million to California Fire Safe Councils to reduce the increased risk given the massive tree mortality.

Historically, wind has sparked the worst fires consuming forest and homes such as the arson-sparked King Fire near Pollock Pines.

“The rain has been great, but no amount will bring back the trees that have died to the drought and bark beetle,” said Brice Bennett, CalFire spokesman for the Amador El Dorado Unit.

Stationed in Cameron Park, Bennett knows all too well what fire can do – especially in high-wind situations.

Last year alone churned out the worst wildfire season in history for the West from Alaska to Lake County.

Tahoe has endured its fair share as well. Take the devastating Angora Fire in 2007, which burned 254 houses.

What worries many fire officials is the threat of more wind with climate change. Most climatologists predict more storms, meaning wind and lightning strikes may become more prevalent.

Fire agency officials insist they need help more than ever before. With that, CalFire has \$3 million in grant funding for a variety of fire prevention projects aimed at reducing the elevated threat due to ongoing drought and significant tree mortality.

“This grant funding will help communities prepare for what is likely to be another challenging fire season,” said Chief Ken Pimlott, CalFire director and state forester.

And with that, fire agencies are becoming more organized, more methodical and more scientific than ever before. Some have turned to the study of science. Some have thrown more types of resources into the firefighting mix. Many have turned to each

other – hence the formation of the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team, a collaboration of 17 member agencies sharing notes at monthly meetings in fire season.

There's even the "Firepit," a public information team.

It's a war, and these soldiers with water and retardant are determined to win it.

But many agencies on both sides of the state line are urging homeowners to help.



The lightning-induced 2015 Washington Fire threatened to burn Markleeville. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

Not the time for awareness to smolder

Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District officials are concerned there's complacency among homeowners regarding the work necessary to keep their houses and loved ones protected.

For instance, the phones rang off the hook at the district after the Angora Fire to use the chipper to grind up wood debris, thus coaxing residents to clean up their yards. Now the phone barely rings.

It's advised to provide a 100-foot buffer around structures. In some cases – namely Kingsbury Grade for example, Tahoe Douglas Fire experts expand the defensible space directive to 300 feet.

The cheat grass brought on by ample precipitation is expected to be a prominent threat to Nevada residents because of an ample amount of precipitation. Like manzanita, firefighters consider cheat grass primary fuel for fast-spreading wildfires. It blankets Spooner Summit and Kingsbury Grade.

The sun dries the Grade in the morning and cooks in the afternoon. So the district has been out thinning the area.

“Every day could be dangerous,” Tahoe Douglas Fire Marshal Eric Guevin said while scoping out the fire hazard on the Grade with district Forester John Pickett.

They stood in awe as the sun was setting feet from a house at the end of Bonnie Court at the notion of a major wildfire happening there. There's a level of respect for the arch enemy, and Pickett talks about it with a lot of energy.

Despite all the work the homeowner did to the property, the topography is a bit of a challenge.

“We have our red flag days, and we're definitely concerned. We can't change the topography and the weather, but we can change the conditions,” Guevin told *Lake Tahoe News*.

“If anything starts at Van Sickle, it will be here in an hour,” Pickett said, motioning with his arm in the path of a chimney leading up to the cul-de-sac. The prevailing winds on a western facing slope are “by far the most dangerous.”

The air draft would pull the fire up like it's ascending a chimney.

And worse yet, the fire doesn't have to reach a neighborhood to consume it. The wind often pitches ahead embers that often land on roofs. During the Angora Fire, embers were reported to have landed as far away as Lake Tahoe Community College.



John Pickett and Eric Guevin with Tahoe Douglas Fire point out a home on Kingsbury Grade with good defensible space. Photo/Susan Wood

It takes a village

Sometimes homeowners can do all they can but have neighbors who are negligent.

“We can defend this house,” Pickett said, while roaming around a home at 100 Granite Crest Drive. The duo even noticed the homeowner had sealed the chimney and commended the resident.

"This is defensible, but in a dangerous neighborhood," Pickett said.

Farther down, the forester pointed out a house with a shake roof, pine needles everywhere and tree limbs touching the house.

This is why Guevin and Pickett stressed the importance of all in a neighborhood to participate. There are even community work days sponsored by Tahoe Douglas in which clearing brush and limbing trees is done for free.

Guevin reported the district sits at 70 percent compliance in fire prevention and wants to see that number go up.

Pickett commended residents for being diligent about calling at every puff of smoke. Although signs have to be put out telling people not to call during control burns, Pickett welcomes the activism.

"People are doing a great job of being vigilant because the consequences are too high," he said.

The bark beetle and drought are raising havoc with the trees, and he's counting on residents to be just as diligent about ridding the beetle infestation if they can.

Homeowners may call pest control to inject the tree if they see color shift in the needles to a yellow-grey, but this is expensive and not always effective. If branches die at mid-crown, that's also a sign of the bark beetle consuming a tree.

"It's not if, it's when, and we have got to be ready for it. That's our responsibility of living in this great environment," Guevin said, as if rallying troops before the next fire.



In 2007, 254 houses were destroyed and about 3,100 acres – mostly USFS land – burned on the South Shore of Lake Tahoe. Photo/Lake Valley Fire

Fire knows no boundaries

Lake Valley Fire Protection District has its own areas of concern. Its focus in thinning projects revolves around the Meyers community off Pioneer Trail, with a close inspection of the heavily wooded Apache and Mandan pockets of the neighborhood.

The concern has become so serious the district is considering a new level of enforcement beyond inspections and warnings to negligent violators. But for now, education is a nice way of saying we're all in this together.

The individual private vacant lots have prompted an extra level of concern given the property owners may be miles away and not present to see the fire threat every day.

"One good winter won't erase ... years of drought," Martin Goldberg of Lake Valley Fire told *Lake Tahoe News*.

And the heightened awareness and anxiety isn't limited to the more sparsely populated areas – especially since there's an increase in property owners building out in the forests.

“Some people are building homes in fire prone spots. It changes the way we fight fires, when we’re having to send more resources in to protect these homes,” said Mike Taormina, South Lake Tahoe fire wildland operations coordinator.

A good example would be South Lake Tahoe’s Needle Peak-Saddle Road neighborhood, whose residents watched in horror when a discarded cigarette from a Heavenly gondola car sparked a wildfire and gave chills to city residents in 2002. It roared up the east ridge from what’s now the Van Sickle Bi-State Park. Before it did, though, this reporter witnessed the wind swirl the fire toward the town.

That was as much a reality check as the Angora Fire’s back blaze that hopped over Highway 89.

“It all comes down to having a plan with pro-active thinning. We’re coming to a time when the fire season is getting longer. In Southern California, it’s year round. Obviously, we’re worried about it even though we got precipitation. But we’ve been in a sustained drought. It’s going to take time for the fuels to recover and for the fuels moisture to come back up,” Taormina warned. “Especially where we live, it’s not something to take lightly.”