

# Fire prevention critical when living in a forest

By Kathryn Reed

An ember should be able to hit a house, drop and not start a spot fire. That's called defensible space.

John Pickett, forester with Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District, talked recently about all things fire and what homeowners can do to make their home less combustible.

Five feet from the structure is the most critical. Pickett said there have been too many times when firefighters have needed to use a chain saw to cut the deck from the house. When it comes to the 5-foot space, it includes that distance from the deck. In the fire world the deck is a structure.

Pine needles under a wood step are an accelerant. While they may be a pain to dislodge, the alternative could be destructive, even deadly.

Homeowners in the basin are discovering that without defensible space they are unable to get insurance.

Pickett said 350 dwellings in his district in Nevada were dropped from State Farm. The fire department worked with the homeowners and insurance company to get 300 of them to retain their coverage.

He said Hartford is no longer writing policies in Tahoe Douglas and that USSA is studying the area.

A woman at the talk sponsored by the South Lake Tahoe Friends of the Library said she was unable to get AAA. However, a AAA rep in Carson City told *Lake Tahoe News* the company has an aggressive fire line underwriting restriction, but policies are still being written throughout the South Shore.

AAA was one of the better companies during Angora.

It was nine years ago this summer those 254 houses on the outskirts of South Lake Tahoe went up in flames in the Angora Fire. Six weeks later five houses were lost on the West Shore in the Washoe Fire when a gas barbecue was left on.



While all fire cannot be prevented, there are steps that can be taken to make individual properties less combustible.  
Photo/LTN file

Most wildland fires are human caused – as were these two. Angora was from an illegal campfire at Seneca Pond that wasn't fully extinguished.

Besides residents needing to do their part, fire agencies in the basin are doing theirs, too. Part of this includes working with locals by doing inspections. Tahoe Douglas inspects every house on a four-year rotation. While they can't go on the property without permission, a lot can be seen from the road. The goal isn't to issue fines – though, that's possible – but instead to get people to comply.

Fire departments throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin will do a defensible space inspections for residents for free. It's all about creating a fire adapted community. More information is

available **online**.

In Tahoe Douglas the Zephyr Fire Crew is responsible for keeping the forest healthy through controlled burns and thinning the forest.

“It is not a haphazard sport. We take the time to do it right,” Pickett said after he showed a video of the crew starting a prescribed fire.

These weren't slash piles, but instead underbrush that was deliberately set on fire. It's a low intensity fire that consumes the ground fuels. Like a surgeon the marks left behind are deliberate and well thought out.