

# Fire crews working to make Tahoe basin safe

By Kathryn Reed

MEYERS – In an effort to get ahead of the fire season, crews from various fire agencies in the Lake Tahoe Basin have been gathering to talk about a united approach.

“Wildfires are becoming more problematic because of the changing landscape and more homes are where fires burn,” Forest Schafer with North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District said. “We want human communities to co-exist with fire so it is not a disaster.”

Shafer was speaking at a meeting this month to fellow fire officials at the main Lake Valley station.

Creating fire adapted communities and working to thin the forest where it interfaces with developed areas are ways to achieve those goals.

A fire adapted community “can survive a wildfire with little or no assistance from firefighters. These communities are characterized by homes that are built of fire resistant materials and where vegetation and flammable items have been reduced around the home to provide good defensible space. They are buffered by fuel breaks where flammable vegetation has been modified to slow the spark of flames and provide a zone where firefighter can aggressively fight a fire.”



Chris Anthony with CalFire talks about fuel reduction in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Photo/LTN

Last fall's Emerald Fire was used as an example of how fire behaves when the forest has been treated. It had similar characteristics to the devastating 2007 Angora fire that reduced 254 houses on the outskirts of South Lake Tahoe to ash. The winds and humidity were comparable. Both started in the forest and ran toward subdivisions.

The big difference is the amount of treated forest was much greater in the Emerald terrain. Firefighters just finished studying the effectiveness of fuels reduction in that area off Highway 89 between Camp Richardson and Emerald Bay.

"There is a big change in ember production if we can keep it on the ground," CalFire Division Chief Chris Anthony said.

That's not to say a thinned forest won't have crown fires, but the likelihood decreases and the negative impact can be less.

Money is needed to keep the thinning going forward. (Since 2000 nearly 47,000 acres have been treated in the basin on private, local, state and federal lands.) Agencies continually

apply for grants, with the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act being a primary source.

With June marking the 10-year anniversary of the devastating Angora Fire, the horrors of a wildfire are very much on the minds of fire officials.

The good that came out of that inferno was the creation of the Nevada Fire Safe Council. While it went bankrupt amid lots of controversy, in its place is the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team (TFFT). It is comprised of 20 agencies and has more of a basinwide approach.

TFFT recognizes three distinct geographic regions in the basin – the South, West and North shores. The group looks to identify the areas in most need of fuels treatment regardless of ownership.

TFFT is able to cross state, county and city lines. Many grants can be used throughout the territory. The team aspect is very real and not in name only. This is important because a fire doesn't see boundaries.

Van Sickle Bi-State Park and land owned by South Tahoe Public Utility District are two of the more troublesome locations that will be addressed this year.

There is also money (\$150 million) in the recently passed Lake Tahoe Restoration Act for fuels reduction. The problem is Congress has not allocated the money.

Coming up on March 27 is the third annual Nevada Network of Fire Adapted Communities Conference in Reno. Participants will include stakeholders in Nevada's wildland urban interface, including members of wildfire-prone communities; local, state and federal agencies; and Community Emergency Response Team volunteers from Carson City, Douglas and Washoe counties.