

Opinion: Wildfire awareness critical in Tahoe

By Joanne Marchetta

This June is wildfire awareness month at Lake Tahoe. It also marks the 10th anniversary of the Angora Fire, the most destructive wildland fire in memory at Tahoe.

An illegal and abandoned campfire started the Angora Fire on June 24, 2007. The fire quickly spread toward Meyers, stoked by strong winds and forests overgrown with hazardous fuels. In a few days, the fire burned 3,100 acres and destroyed 254 homes.



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The fire plunged the South Shore into emergency response as smoke billowed into the sky, embers rained down, and flames spread into neighborhoods. Firefighters rushed into action to fight the blaze. Thousands of people were forced to evacuate. Some returned to find nothing left of their homes and belongings except ashes.

As I evacuated, watching other homes on my street catch fire, I experienced terrorizing emotions unlike anything I have felt before.

Fortunately, no human lives were lost in the Angora Fire,

thanks to the heroic work of firefighters and law enforcement. But the fire changed people's lives. It proved the strength and resilience of Meyers and the greater South Shore community during the fire and in the weeks, months, and years after as people regrouped, rebuilt, and helped one another.

Ten years later, we see fully how much there was to learn from Angora. It showed us the threat of catastrophic wildfire is real at Tahoe. That any afternoon has the potential to turn into a disaster during fire season, and that we must work together to reduce that risk.

Lots of anger was directed toward TRPA after Angora. TRPA had been working to help address the wildfire threat, but many saw our actions as too little, too late, and years of frustration were leveled at the agency during and after the Angora tragedy.

TRPA heeded the call for reform and I'm proud of the positive changes we have made over the last decade. TRPA has partnered with many other organizations, and together we have taken important steps to improve the health of Tahoe's forests and prepare our communities and public lands for wildfire.

We are still working to address the harmful impacts of logging done a century ago during the Comstock era. That logging clear cut most of the basin and changed the composition of its forests. Trees grew back in much greater densities and in uniform-aged stands that pose a greater risk for high-intensity wildfires.

Agencies were working to thin Tahoe's forests and reduce hazardous fuels before Angora. The fire proved the importance of that work, burning much less severely in areas treated prior to the start of the fire.

Today, agencies around the lake are working as a unified group, the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team, to reduce hazardous fuels in Tahoe's forests. Formed after the Angora Fire, the

team has made exceptional strides, treating more than 69,000 acres of the 117,000 acres of wildland urban interface where Tahoe's forests and communities meet. This remains a top priority as we work to return Tahoe's forests to a healthier, more natural condition less prone to catastrophic fires.

As we enter another fire season, we must all remember the importance of creating defensible space. Properly managing flammable vegetation around our homes and businesses significantly reduces the danger of wildfire. Please contact your local fire district to get a defensible space inspection done this spring if you have not already.

Consider getting involved with the Tahoe Network of Fire Adapted Communities. Spearheaded by the Tahoe Resource Conservation District, this program is building and strengthening partnerships between homeowners and fire protection districts so important steps to create fire-adapted communities can be tackled at the neighborhood level.

Please be mindful of the importance of wildfire prevention. Ninety percent of fires that ignite each year at Tahoe are human caused. Angora showed the damage one illegal campfire can do. While enjoying Tahoe this summer, take every precaution to avoid starting a fire.

The Meyers community has made an inspiring recovery from the Angora Fire. That recovery has not been easy, and burnt trees still standing and visible for miles on Angora Ridge are a stark reminder of the danger wildfire poses.

That danger persists as our region grapples with the impacts of drought and a warming climate. Wildfire is a natural and important part of the ecosystem in the forests around our homes, but each fire does not need to be a disaster. The time to prevent and prepare for Tahoe's next wildfire is now, before it is burning.

With public agencies, homeowners, residents, and visitors all

aware of this danger and working together to prevent and prepare for wildfires, we can continue to take the important steps needed to protect our communities and improve the health and resiliency of the forests and natural resources we all treasure at Tahoe.

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