

Angora Fire anniversary – a time of reflection



Speakers at the June 24 10-year Angora Fire anniversary reflect on the changes since 2007. Photo/Susan Wood

By Susan Wood

CAMP RICHARDSON – In what could have been the safest place to be in the event of a wildland blaze, about 30 Lake Tahoe fire and forest management dignitaries and community stakeholders came out to commemorate the 10-year anniversary of the Angora Fire outside the Valhalla Grand Hall on Saturday.

It was a picture perfect, serene setting to reflect back on the devastating fire that consumed 254 homes and 3,100 acres in the Upper Truckee and Tahoe Mountain neighborhoods.

For some in attendance, it was an emotional time – a time to heal and note the tremendous progress the Tahoe Fire & Fuels Team has made over the last decade.

The slogan of the day could have been “stronger together” as speaker after speaker on the panel pointed out the collective collaboration Lake Tahoe agencies made for the common good of the community.



The scar of the Angora Fire will be a reminder for decades of that 2007 tragedy. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Elwood Miller, the Nevada Network of Fire Adapted Communities Coordinator, became poetic when describing ripe fire conditions.

“And into the fire-prone (conditions) comes people,” he said, in explaining how homes built in the forest are fuel for fire.

Despite tons of equipment, super aircraft and thousands of firefighters, major fires are costing more than \$1 billion to fight.

The era of the mega fire overwhelms fire resources, echoed Miller. He received an encased hatchet in honor of his retirement next week after years of service as the “consummate woodsman,” according to Tahoe Fire and Fuel Team Chairman Forest Schafer.



Leona Allen pays respects to her father at the 10-year Angora commemoration by wearing his belt. Photo/Susan Wood

Schafer, former Lake Valley Fire Chief Brian Schafer's son, explained the fire ax is a traditional retirement gift. The hatchet serves as a sign of prevention – a method of firefighting forest management agencies focus on.

Partnerships, partnerships, partnerships represent the underlying goal, Schafer emphasized.

And with the successful ones come goals met, as noted by Kate Dargan, who as California fire marshal at the time served on the Bi-State Fire Commission that spawned the Angora Protocol of forest management practices going forward. The commission was formed shortly after the fire by then California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and former Nevada Gov. Jim Gibbons in response to the need for an action plan to quell future Angoras.

Dargan commended the fire agencies and political organizations in succeeding to meet 90 percent of the 90 recommendations made by the commission. The efforts required 19 public hearings over a seven-month period.

“This needs to be shouted around the world,” she said, calling the efforts “solutions that make a difference in your community.”

After all, community – which is people centric – places people first and politics last to effect lasting, civically-minded change.



Norma Santiago as El Dorado County supervisor during the Angora Fire was instrumental in helping people recover. Photo/Susan Wood

“It’s our resilience as a community that moves us forward,” a teary former El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago told the attentive crowd. Santiago, who was a newly elected supervisor at the time, was thrown into a fire of competing goals and an angry mob of citizens in wanting change for protecting property.

"We live in divisive times," she said, while commending county staff and agency personnel for "making sure everyone was OK."

A visibly moved Santiago received a plaque of recognition for her efforts.

She was not alone in feeling the commemoration represented a poignant time.

Leona Allen, a former police dispatch supervisor who runs the Lake Tahoe Fire Academy and serves on the Lake Valley Fire Protection District board of directors, lost her home and her parents' home. The lifelong Tahoe resident made June 24 about her father who at 90 years old lost everything, but healed by creating a community garden on his lot.

She told the attendees her father pledged: "We got our community after that day," in a show of unity that became a synergistic force for change and care.

"I'm wearing his belt today," Allen said in a touching tribute to her late father, Owen Evans.

"What did we learn?" she asked.

Allen cited evacuation preparedness as huge, along with how implementing defensible space works and that resiliency makes for a community of survivors.

And survival was the order of the day and the time.

Remarkably, no one was killed or critically injured June 24, 2007, but the fire's impact was lasting.

Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Deputy Director Jim Lawrence recalled the day like it was yesterday.

"I remember where I was," the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency board chairman said like it was the day President John F. Kennedy was shot and killed.



Homes to this day continue to be built on the 254 lots where a house burned to the ground.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

Lawrence came up from Carson City for a hike up to Snow Valley Peak. At the top, he saw a wisp of smoke that soon got immensely large by the time he got back to his vehicle at Spooner Summit. A bad feeling set in the pit of his stomach.

Lawrence's sinking feeling turned into a grave reality for Eli Ilano, who recounted the fire's aftermath as "a scene from Armageddon." He was the deputy forest supervisor for the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit at the time and is currently forest supervisor for the Tahoe National Forest.

"It was a scary sight – like nothing I've ever seen before," Ilano said of the tour he took to witness the landscape.

Still, the community rose like a Phoenix from the ashes, Ilano pointed out. The crossroads of a divided, angry community was clear.

"Are we going to stop blaming each other and start to come together?" was the question the community needed to answer.

Yes, was the response.

The collective of agencies developed an action plan that has

ultimately led to more than 16,000 acres of land treated for fuel reduction on both sides of the state line. Abandoned slash piles due for burning made the Angora Fire particularly hot as it roared through the county.

Within the fire area, 1,100 acres have been reforested and about 2,000 feet of stream channel restored.

The Fire & Fuels Team, consisting of 20 agencies, has done as much to work with the public as it has to create a healthy forest. Consequently, the community has learned how to adapt to the risk of wildland blazes; because there will be other fires.

And no longer will a report with so much at stake be considered a document to collect dust on the shelf. To that, TRPA government affairs staffer Julie Regan nodded.

We're not perfect, but we've come a long way, many reiterated.