

Opinion: Lahontan expedites projects post-Angora

Publisher's note: Lake Tahoe News this month will be running several stories leading up to the 10th anniversary of the Angora Fire on June 24, 2007.



Patty Kouyoumdjian and the Lahontan staff work to make forest health a priority. Photo/Provided

By Patty Kouyoumdjian

As the 10-year anniversary of the Angora Fire approaches, many of us in the government agencies charged with environmental protection are reflecting on the lessons learned from that natural disaster and what we've done since then to ensure we don't see a repeat of the tragic destruction that ravaged our community.

The devastating results of the Angora Fire touched many lives as hundreds of residences were destroyed and families found themselves evacuated from their homes as others unfortunately lost everything and became homeless – including members of our

staff. With these thoughts still with us, the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Board has taken actions to help facilitate forest health, create defensible space and protect water quality.

Prior to the Angora Fire, the Lahontan Water Board's members directed staff to speed up the necessary permitting process to thin our forests, as forest health and defensible space are necessary to protect the public. This action was significant since the Lahontan Water Board's rules adopted in 1980 to protect Lake Tahoe's exceptional water clarity prohibited land disturbance in sensitive stream zones unless the Lahontan Water Board granted exemptions. Projects that related to public health and safety, or environmental protection, fall under these exemptions.

Following the Angora Fire, the Lahontan Water Board took additional steps to further simplify and expedite the permitting process for forest thinning and defensible space projects. The Water Board's regulatory tool to complete these projects is the Timber Waiver – a permit with performance expectations that ensures water quality protection while allowing tree removal and vegetation management to occur. The Timber Waiver was updated in 2009 and 2014, and with each change the Lahontan Water Board increased flexibility in the permit to expedite projects.

The Timber Waiver describes several tiers based on the threat to water quality. Vegetation clearing on private lots for construction or to create defensible space, and hand crew operations on any size project do not require notification to the Water Board. Larger projects using existing roads and meeting some conditions require the project's managers to submit applications to the Water Board, but they can begin work without immediate Water Board response.

Only projects with a high risk to water quality, such as new road construction, require the Lahontan Water Board to review

a permit application before work can begin. During the last update of the Timber Waiver in 2014, the U.S. Forest Service sent its appreciation and support to the Lahontan Water Board for the changes made to simplify and expedite permitting. Since these changes in 2014, Water Board staff has seen increased levels of compliance and water quality protection from the U.S. Forest Service.

The Lahontan Water Board participates in the multi-agency Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team meetings where priorities are set, lessons learned are shared, and successes are tracked. Because of our increased level of participation and cooperation with fire districts and the U.S. Forest Service, the Water Board incorporated the results of demonstration projects and research into the Timber Waiver. The waiver allows for some earth-moving equipment in sensitive stream environment zones, and it allows pile burning in stream zones. We have made improvements while ensuring water quality is not harmed, and now more projects are being completed to reduce the risk of severe wildfire in our communities and watersheds.

Water quality impacts and the destruction of vital watershed functions from severe wildfires continue to pose a significant threat in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Fortunately, following the Angora Fire, multiple agencies, including the Lahontan Water Board staff, quickly mobilized and cooperated to ensure erosion control measures were installed. The Water Board also secured funds to support post-fire water quality monitoring and continues to support watershed restoration efforts.

Because of these quick actions water quality impacts to Lake Tahoe were considered minor. Watershed recovery and restoration is evident – streams and meadows are doing the work of enhancing water quality. The greatest impacts to Lake Tahoe came – and continue to come – from our man-made environment. We can continue to improve our water quality and safety by maintaining defensible spaces, protecting soils from erosion and infiltrating runoff.

Patty Kouyoumdjian is executive officer of Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board.