

Opinion: Learning from fire

By Garry Bowen

We have now commemorated the Angora Fire of June 24, 2007, rightly honoring those who both endured and suffered through the destruction and aftermath of the trauma.

Many have written about their thoughts, along with the anguish at determining whose fault it was, revealing what they thought was problematic with various municipal policies, as if that would mollify the pain gone through.



Garry Bowen

As a longtime Tahoe person, my take will offer another perspective, as you'll see, as it is the conditions of our forests that require the most deliberation, given the possibilities of their uncertain and dangerous fate.

Noted by others on that typical Tahoe summer day as to their whereabouts, mine were with my son (with grandchildren in the backseat) on Pioneer Trail nearing the 7-Eleven on the way to Stateline, when going in the opposite direction was a small USFS pickup suddenly switching on the rooftop emergency lights. Something was up. As that happened, I turned my head as it passed by, catching the first glimpse of smoke from the southwest above the buildings. It gave me a chill, as it also inspired a lesson to my son, who did not know of my work with DRI on fire ecology, or even what that was.

It was the color of the smoke in those first moments that caught my attention: it was a smoky beige with orange streaks within; it was not water (evoking steam and white); it was not dark grey or black befitting an oil-based fire – it was the color of a wood fire, and the orange defined sparks within. I told my son within that minute that this would be a disaster in the making, as those sparks were in the wind that had developed very quickly.

Those comments were the first inklings of what we now know as the Angora Fire.

I have been working on reducing catastrophic fire for a long time, notably via a more preventive mode of converting biomass into energy, via work done with the Department of Energy's Renewable Energy Laboratory in Golden, Colo. The Energy Department is one that Tahoe does not ordinarily do much with, as the focus here is about natural resource agencies, which do not think of energy as necessarily part of their repertoire.

A few months before Angora, in January of that year, I was invited by the Washington, D.C., office of the Forest Service to a "ceremony" in Lake Arrowhead, with the National Fire Plan, along with nine out of 10 regional foresters (there are only 10 regions in the USFS). The 10th, considered the crown jewel of all 10 is Alaska, with its three temperate zones. The regional forester was not at Arrowhead, as he was fighting a 750,000-acre fire there: Denny Bschor, who I met at NREL on the same issues mentioned above, made a strategic error in trying to mollify both sides of an ongoing issue: half-a-project for timber, the other half for environmentalists. Of course, neither side was satisfied; the conditions were then ripe for a large fire.

Also at Arrowhead was Dale Bosworth, the USFS chief at that time, with whom I met. The occasion was marked by the introduction of a 30kW gasification unit used to convert biomass into energy, thought to be a direction they were to

take, having ordered a future 50 kW unit for the USFS visitor center there.

As someone else brought up the local meeting at South Tahoe Middle School, I was conflicted, as I could not diminish the pain of my city, as I had already seen incredible and extensive damage done by fire (750,000 acres, 3,500 homes lost), but it was obviously easy for me to empathize with all those open wounds.

My interest in reducing catastrophic fire increased, as they say, it was getting that much "closer to home." Several times here I have used the word "conditions" as it is a relatively obscure idea, among all the staff and people devoted to either forestry or to the fighting of fires that occur, meaning that, for simplicity, the conditions are in the domain of systemic, generally lost in our fascination for specialties.

A healthy forest is characterized by functioning across many scientific disciplines, and the only discipline that includes most is that of an ecologist, because sort of by definition involves an entire system.

The only outliers to this are: (1) agronomy (soil science), and (2) the climate, which is not under "ground control." Tahoe's "take care" program only begins to address the attention actually needed to become proper stewards to living in the forest, as we do in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

With Tahoe's cachet, of course both state governors convened a Blue Ribbon panel, itself a process interrupted by yet another six-figure acreage fire down south (about the same size as the one reviewed in Arrowhead).

Noting that the big tree forests are all in the 10 Western states (including B.C.), all 10 Western governors have a seriously vested interest in reducing catastrophic fire, regardless of party affiliation; it is thus the conditions that need to be addressed, on levels still inadequate to

imminent threats.

At the time, the Angora Fire reminded me of the Hayman Fire in Colorado: they had the first of 13,000 acres circumscribing the shoreline of Denver's largest water reserve (for 800,000 people), followed by a second one just a few years later of 153,000 acres, the Hayman. This suggested (with regards to Tahoe's hallowed clarity efforts) that the Denver Water Co. was most likely a good source of water quality testing, so a reminder of that was made to the equally hallowed Blue Ribbon, as both California and Colorado are part of that 10 Western state coalition.

Whether Arrowhead, Angora, or anywhere in the west, the issues leading to Angora are still viable, and attempts to be politically-correct about whether we are in any anthropocentric (man-made) dilemma will fall short. The climate is only partially responsible for the current fuel aridity (dryness) state of affairs, we all, as either shepherds or stewards of our surroundings, need to pay rapt attention to what is going on in our misaligned world.

That will be our best salvation, and most comfortable way to live and love in a future – take care and pay more attention.

Garry Bowen has more than a 50-year connection to the South Shore, with an immediate past devoted to global sustainability, on most of its current fronts: green building, energy and water efficiencies, and public health.