

Tree mortality in Tahoe a growing concern



The orange reflects dead trees in Tahoe in July 2016.
Photo/USFS

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – It was a lively conversation about a deadly situation at Wednesday’s Tahoe Region Planning Agency Governing Board meeting.

Trees took up the morning session; specifically dead trees and what is being done about them.

One good winter didn’t cure what ails Lake Tahoe’s forests – or those throughout the Sierra. Part of the problem is drought, part is beetle infestation – though, those are

linked.

The board on Aug. 23 was given an update about the strategic initiative to create a healthy forest in the basin. The board members also approved a permit for Caltrans to thin hundreds of trees along California's highways in the area.

While there is still more green than orange in the forest here, especially compared to the southern and central Sierra, the number of dead trees is increasing. According to statistics provided by Kevin Conway of CalFire this is the tree mortality rate in the Lake Tahoe Basin:

- 2012 –1,025
- 2013 – 905
- 2014 – 5,989
- 2015 – 34,947
- 2016 – 126,479.

Statewide more than 100 million dead trees have been identified.

Conway's report said, "We have never seen an event which will so profoundly impact the forest of California and its associated resources including water, wildlife, fire regimes, public safety, forest products, recreation, and their associated economics."

For Calfire, the major issue is the dying trees are fuel for a wildland fire.

Mike Vollmer, TRPA environmental improvement program manager, said the sugar pines have been "extremely stressed by drought." Drought leads trees to be more susceptible to being ravaged by insects like the pine engraver, fir engraver, satin moth, and mountain pine beetle. All but the moth is native to

the area.

The moth is most prolific in the Marlette Lake area right now. The hope is nature – aka winter – will kill them off and pesticides would not be needed.

Austin Sass, who represents South Lake Tahoe on the Governing Board, questioned why no money is being allocated to help local residents and businesses to remove dead trees when the fire community admits its priority is public safety. There was no answer from the firefighters in the room.

Caltrans, though, is coming to the aid of some private entities with their plan to remove trees along nearly 68 miles of highway on the California side of the basin. This includes highways 50, 89, 28 and 267.

If a dead or hazardous tree along a state highway poses a public threat and is on private property, Caltrans will remove it for free assuming the property owner grants permission. If the person says no and the tree falls onto state property, they are liable for any damages as well as the removal. (Caltrans has the right of way 100 feet in both directions from the center line.)

The TRPA on Wednesday approved the permit to fell 875 hazardous trees that are more than 14 inches in diameter that the state agency has identified. The completely dead trees don't require a permit, nor do ones less than 14 inches in diameter.

"All trees within this area that are dead, dying, diseased and/or hazardous and can hit the road if they fail are being marked for removal," the report says.

Any tree more than 30 inches in diameter that is identified for removal must also have a second OK by TRPA's forester.

The staff report says, "... due to the current dynamic nature of

tree mortality in the Tahoe basin, the exact number of dying trees requiring a TRPA permit can only be known for a short period of time as dying trees become dead trees and new trees are identified as dying. For this reason, the Governing Board is being asked to permit a process and methodology for identifying hazard trees for this project rather than a specific number of trees.”

Luther Pass will be the first area where Caltrans will work.

One of the costly and time consuming aspects of dealing with these drought-beetle ridden trees is that they are scattered about, as opposed to being in a grove.

Larry Sevinson, Placer County’s rep on the board, asked what will be done with all the wood. There is no definitive answer. That is the conundrum with removing them. Much of it is not salvageable for the lumber industry, as **LTN reported in May**.

“This issue is now being talked about everywhere. It’s a major issue of what to do with the wood when it’s removed,” TRPA Executive Director Joanne Marchetta said. She mentioned how at this week’s environmental summit Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., expressed support for Republican Rep. Tom McClintock’s idea to lift the export ban for wood products going to China. This could open up a huge market.