

Opinion: Wine Country fires wake-up for Tahoe

By Joanne Marchetta

The heartbreaking fires in Northern California's Wine Country this month have upended hundreds of thousands of people's lives. In just over one week, the fires across Northern California burned more than 220,000 acres, destroyed 6,000 buildings, and killed more than 40 people. Our hearts go out to our neighbors in Napa, Sonoma, and Mendocino counties.

The Angora Fire left the Tahoe region with special empathy for the distress so many people are going through with these wildfires, although their situation is far more devastating. And these fires, like the Angora Fire, are yet another grim reminder that our lives and our livelihoods depend on the continued steps we take to reduce wildfire risk and prepare for even more catastrophic wildfires.



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Forest health remains a serious issue for Lake Tahoe. Like so many other areas, Tahoe's forests face threats from climate change, drought, bark beetle outbreaks, and tree mortality that increase the risk of wildfire. Residents, fire districts, and other local, state, and federal partners are working collaboratively to address these threats. Still more is needed.

Because of climate change, the fire season in the Western U.S. is over two months longer than it was just four decades ago. Wildfires are larger, more frequent, and burning more intensely. Drought has left forests with millions of dead trees to fuel more dangerous fires.

Improving forest health and preparing for wildfire takes action on many levels. Twenty partner agencies on the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team, including TRPA, are working together and with basin residents to address each of them. But we must continue to act now, before Tahoe's next fire is burning.

People who manage the vegetation on their property to create defensible space around homes and businesses are taking an important first step. Properties without defensible space are much more at risk, allowing wildfire to spread among brush to structures and burn into the tree canopy through ladder fuels. More than 27,500 properties at Tahoe have been inspected for defensible space over the last 10 years. People who have not created defensible space or requested an inspection to learn what they need to do to prepare for wildfire should do so now. It is something each of us can do today, and fire agencies are ready to help.

But one property's defensible space is only as good as the neighbor's. That's why Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team partners launched the Tahoe Network of Fire Adapted Communities. Led by the Tahoe Resource Conservation District, this program is helping residents work with their neighbors and local fire districts to improve wildfire preparedness on a broader scale in our communities.

Most Tahoe neighborhoods are in the wildland urban interface: The dangerous areas where our homes and the forest meet. These areas are the top priority for removing overgrown brush and trees that could fuel a catastrophic fire. Over the last 20 years, the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team has thinned 70,000 acres of forest in the wildland urban interface. Partners are

working to treat the remaining 50,000 acres over the next 10 years. Along with more people creating defensible space, brush removal, tree thinning, and prescribed fire in wildland urban interface areas must continue for us to improve forest health and reduce wildfire risk.

Just as important is expanding forest health initiatives into the larger forest. Tree mortality from drought and bark beetles is a growing danger. California now has more than 102 million dead trees. While the most severe mortality is in the southern Sierra and foothills, the number of dead trees at Tahoe has grown steadily and now stands at more than 136,000.

A collaborative tree mortality task force is working to address these issues in the Tahoe basin. And in August, TRPA issued an emergency permit for Caltrans to remove dead and dying trees along highways at Tahoe. Work started this September along Highway 89 and will continue next spring along other highways.

The Lake Tahoe West Restoration Partnership is working on a comprehensive plan to improve forest health, water quality, and recreation opportunities throughout 60,000 acres of the West Shore, in an area extending from Emerald Bay to Dollar Point near Tahoe City. This innovative landscape-scale initiative is being led by the U.S. Forest Service, California Tahoe Conservancy, California State Parks, National Forest Foundation, and TRPA. It will help us achieve multiple project benefits in a more streamlined, cost-effective manner and develop a model for healthy forests in other parts of the Tahoe basin.

We are making progress, but have much more to do. By continuing to collaborate and work together, we can reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire at Tahoe. Each of us has a role to play, from wildfire preparedness to helping prevent wildfires—more than 90 percent of which are human caused through carelessness. Please reach out to aid those in Napa,

Sonoma, and Mendocino who need help now more than ever. And join us by taking action to protect the health of Tahoe's treasured forests and the safety of our communities.

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