

# Dry Christmas trees can spell disaster

By Kathryn Reed

CARSON CITY – Less than a minute. That's how fast a dry Christmas tree can be reduced to charred pine needles.

Most people will start to dismantle their tree in a week or so. Now is when trees start drying out, potentially creating a disastrous scene that could ruin the holiday in so many ways.

The Reno and Carson City fire departments last week demonstrated what happens when a dry tree catches fire and what happens to a healthy tree where there are sprinklers. The difference was dramatic.

The dry tree that had not been watered in days was a ball of fire in seconds. Think if there were presents under it, and anything flammable nearby. It wouldn't just be Christmas that went up in smoke.



*Charred remains of what was a decorated Christmas tree.  
Photo/Kathryn Reed*

**Stats from the National Fire Protection Association:**

- Between 2011-15, there were an average of 200 home fires that started with Christmas trees in the United States. On average, annually these fires caused six deaths, 16 injuries, and \$14.8 million in direct property damage.
- On average, one of every 32 reported home fires that began with a Christmas tree resulted in a death, compared to an average of one death per 143 total reported home fires.
- Electrical distribution or lighting equipment was involved in two of every five home Christmas tree fires.

Bart Chambers, fire marshal for the state of Nevada, stressed how important it is to check the water level for trees on a daily basis.

“You need to make sure your tree is maintained,” Chambers said. If needles are falling, that’s a bad sign.

It’s also important to cut off a couple inches from the base once the tree is at home so it will be able to absorb that water. That’s because once a tree is cut pitch covers the base, forming a scab of sorts that prevents it from taking in water.

Chambers told *Lake Tahoe News* the number of Christmas tree fires across the country is holding steady, but fire officials would like to reduce that number because most are preventable.

Another issue with a fire with a dry tree is that it is going to produce thick, dark smoke. That could create evacuation difficulties for people. A healthy tree is going to give off a gray smoke that is less dense.

In the demonstration the dry tree was fully engulfed within 30 seconds. The smoke alarm sounded at 4 seconds. The walls of the structure it was in were blackened. This could have been someone's family room – a total loss.

For the healthy tree, it had some damage to the back after 90 seconds. The smoke alarm sounded after 15 seconds. The sprinklers kept it in fairly good condition.