

# Opinion: It's up to everyone to be fire safe

By Joanne Marchetta

Nevada and California suffered destructive wildfires last year. Nevada saw 768 fires burn more than 1.3 million acres. California experienced the deadliest, largest, and most destructive wildfires in its history. Just a few hours-drive from Tahoe, more than 40 people died and thousands of homes were destroyed in the wine country and North Bay last October. In Southern California, the Thomas Fire ravaged communities and forest lands last December with damaging flooding and landslides piled on after the fire subsided.



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California's five largest fire years since 1950 have all occurred in the last 12 years, and we know that climate change is making forests and communities more susceptible to catastrophic wildfire. The last four years were all among the hottest on record in California. Wildfire season in the Western United States is now two months longer than it was 40 years ago, making a devastating wildfire possible any time of the year.

Unprecedented tree mortality from the recent five-year drought, the most extreme on record in California, continues to increase the threat of large, damaging wildfires. There are

now more than 129 million dead trees in the state. Forests in the Tahoe basin are faring better than forests in the foothills and Southern Sierra, but the number of dead trees on national forest land at Tahoe has grown each year from 35,000 in 2015 to 72,000 in 2016 and 168,000 in 2017.

The Angora Fire in 2007 remains our starkest reminder of the risk wildfire poses at Tahoe, and how quickly our lives can change in a matter of days, if not hours. We must keep the threat of wildfire in mind and prepare now, before the next fire ignites.

Agencies are working together to reduce the wildfire threat on Tahoe's public lands. Since 1997, partners on the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team have treated more than 70,000 acres to thin forests and reduce the amount of hazardous fuels in them, particularly in the wildland urban interface where forests and communities meet. This work is critically important for healthy, resilient forests, improved ecology, and to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Partners are working to treat the remaining 50,000 acres of wildland urban interface at Tahoe over the next 10 years.

We are also working on innovative projects like Lake Tahoe West, a multi-agency partnership to speed up forest thinning and fuel reduction projects on 60,000 acres of the West Shore and incorporate other projects to improve water quality and recreation opportunities.

The Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team is showing how agencies can partner and work together across jurisdictional boundaries to promote healthy forests and reduce wildfire risk. But agencies cannot prepare Tahoe communities for wildfire on their own. There are important steps that visitors and residents can and must take.

First among them is preventing wildfires. More than 90 percent of wildfires at Lake Tahoe are caused by people. An illegal

campfire left unattended started the Angora Fire that quickly burned more than 3,000 acres and 254 homes. Please be mindful of this risk while recreating at Tahoe.

There are important steps homeowners and residents can take today to prepare for Tahoe's next wildfire. It's not a matter of if we will have another wildfire, it's a matter of when. If you have not already done so, call your local fire district to ask for a defensible space evaluation and then manage the vegetation on your property to help protect your home from a fire. Rake up the pine needles in your yard each spring, removing them from roofs, decks, and brush. Have an evacuation kit ready to go and an evacuation plan for your family. Sign up for emergency notifications from your county, including not only your cell phones but any land line phones. This will help ensure you receive accurate, timely, and actionable information during an emergency.

Finally, consider joining the Tahoe Network of Fire Adapted Communities. This program, run by the Tahoe Resource Conservation District, is recruiting volunteers to work with their neighbors and local fire agencies to boost wildfire preparedness and create fire adapted communities at Lake Tahoe.

Wildfire is a serious risk at Lake Tahoe, but it is also a natural and important part of our landscape's environment. By continuing to work together and preparing now, we can minimize the amount of damage that Tahoe's next wildfire will do to communities and the environment. Please join us today in this important work to keep Tahoe fire safe through what is expected to be another dangerous fire season.

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