Tahoe slogs through fuel reduction jobs with little cash

By Kathryn Reed

Money, or the lack of it, could derail the Lake Tahoe Basin-wide effort to create defensible space throughout the region.

In the last five years, $10.4 million has come to the Nevada Fire Safe Council via the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act. That resource is drying up because the sale of land in Southern Nevada is not as robust as when developers were scurrying to build.



What a treated area looks like. Photo/Stew McMorrow

It wasn't until 2008 that a change was made in the act to allow money to be spent on fuel reduction. That year a $4.4 million grant was awarded to the fire safe council.

"We currently have funding through next season. After that, then things become a little more uncertain," said Mark Novak, fire marshal with the Tahoe-Douglas Fire Protection District.

He said his department has applied for a grant that would fund

another season of fuel reduction work. His agency treats 200-250 acres a season.

Unique to Tahoe-Douglas is voters in 2008 agreed to tax themselves for these types of projects. That brings in about $600,000 a year, but is not enough to fund all the projects.

An advantage to having that known pool of money is when grants require matching funds, the Tahoe-Douglas crew can point to the voter supply of money.

“In our area, about 3,000 acres still need treatment. We need to keep moving forward,” Novak said.

Nevada Fire Safe Council

Andrew List, executive director of the Nevada Fire Safe Council, is researching funding options. One idea is looking at SNPLMA projects that were funded but the project didn’t go forward, therefore the money is unspent. If that money is back in one big pot, Tahoe could be in the running for it.

List wants to create an interest baring account so projects would use the interest, not the principle.

U.S. Forest Service grants have helped the fuels management cause. A FEMA grant is another possibility. A Nevada Division of Forestry grant was one of the early funding sources.

“We act as the fiscal sponsor. We are a nonprofit,” List explained. “We submit grants and work with the five fire districts in the basin. We help put the projects out to bid so we can get the best value and contractor for the job, handle oversight and pay the bills. Then we let the fire guys do what fire guys do.”

The fire safe council works on non-federal land, most of which is private. A rebate program helps residents pay for the treatments. Information about the rebate program is here.

Fire safe council chapters exist throughout the basin, with the first one being formed in Glenbrook in 2002. The idea is neighbors form an alliance to help one another with becoming a fire safe area. There are 56 chapters in the basin.

During the July 17 fire meeting hosted by Assemblyman Ted Gaines, R-Roseville, South Tahoe Fire Chief Lorenzo Gigliotti received interest from three people who would like to be leaders of fire safe chapters. The city currently has five chapters.

Through the council, 1,405 acres were treated in the Lake Tahoe Basin in 2009, 806 acres in 2008, with a goal of 1,500 acres this year.

The council focuses on the wildland urban interface – which is where communities abut the forest.

Defensible space inspections are provided for free by fire departments. This tells a homeowner which trees may need to be removed or other vegetation. Fire behavior, how a slope plays into fire risk, what vegetation burns hot, what is good to have close to a structure and other criteria are considered.

It’s often the smaller tree that are taken out to thin an area. Space between the canopy of the trees is critical so flames can’t jump from one tree to another. Ladder fuels, the low hanging branches, are another concern.

California law requires property owners maintain 30 feet of clean and green space immediately around their houses and 100 feet of defensible space clearing around the residence.

The 2009 operations report for the Tahoe Fire & Fuels Team goes into detail about the acreage that was treated last year, where the funding came from, the rebate program and more.

What others are doing

Fire officials seem to have one eye on their budget and the

other on stands of trees that pose a serious fire risk.

South Lake Tahoe has the Homestead project under way, which is treating 230 acres near Lake Tahoe Community College and Bijou Community Park.

To date, the city has completed 1,620 defensible space inspections.

Placer County provides low-cost, curbside assistance for reducing brush from property. The program is coordinated through the Board of Supervisors, Resource Conservation District, Office of Emergency Services, Air Pollution Control District and sheriff's office.

Money for the program is from a grant, but as of Aug. 2 residents will pay half of the $80 per hour fee. Since it began, the chipper program has created about 100,000 tons of chipped material.

Money was the overriding theme at a July 17 meeting in South Lake Tahoe regarding the bi-state Blue Ribbon Commission that was formed after the 2007 Angora Fire.

Lake Valley Fire Chief Jeff Michael has his fingers crossed, as do others, that Congress will soon reauthorize the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act. This is the bill then-President Bill Clinton helped create in 1997 after the inaugural environmental summit in 1997. Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., is expected to have the act and fuels reduction as central themes to this year's summit that he is hosting Aug. 17.

"We are trying to be as proactive as we can with the funds that we have available," Michael said. "All of it has been grant funding. None one dime is out of the annual operating budget."

His budget comes from people in his service district who pay via their property tax bill. It's possible in the future

voters could be asked to pay more.

Lake Valley averages about 300 acres a year – half done by hand, half mechanical treatment.

“The way we look at fuels, our treatments today aren’t final. It’s infinite,” Michael said. “We will treat the same forest over the next several year. You have to go back and look at it again.”

Lewis Grove, the defensible space inspector for North Tahoe Fire Protection district in Carnelian Bay, says his department is looking to treat 400 acres this season. The idea is to select urban areas that complement what is being done in the forest. This way a fire is less likely to spread from a residence to the forest or vice versa.

He said permanent residents are overwhelmingly supportive of thinning because “they are vested in it.”

“Nature will do what it can to thin a forest – fire, beetle infestation or you can let us,” Grove said.

He said showing people treated areas where wildflowers and wildlife thrive helps convince them it’s the right thing to have a healthy forest.

“For the most part, I think it’s a matter of education,” Grove said of fuel reduction projects.

Resources for residents include:

• Emergency Preparedness Guide

• Living with Fire Guide

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