USFS multimillion dollar South Shore fuels reduction project to start this summer

By Kathryn Reed

Needing to reduce the threat of another wildfire was a point easily agreed to. How to accomplish that goal – well – that was finally resolved at 10:20pm April 11. It took eight years to reach that decision.

On Wednesday the Lahontan Water Quality Control Board voted 5-0 to approve the permit that will allow the U.S. Forest Service to begin the South Shore Fuel Reduction and Healthy Forest Restoration plan. (Board member Jack Clarke was absent.)

The South Shore project is designed to treat 10,200 acres in 10 years at a total cost of $42 million. That dollar amount covers planning, implementation and monitoring.

About $30 million is in hand; coming from the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act. About one-third of that has been spent on planning.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

“The longer the process goes, the less we have,” Scott Parsons, forester with the USFS, told *Lake Tahoe News* during a break in the meeting.

> “With the absence of fire, you get sites like this.”
> — **Duncan Leao, USFS**

Where the remaining $12 million needed to complete the project will come from is still a mystery. But the amount in the bank should cover the first five years, according to Forest Service officials.

Plenty of finger pointing went on during the more than two-hour discussion at Lahontan’s new South Lake Tahoe offices on Silver Dollar Avenue. Plenty of talk of moving forward was part of the dialogue, too, with the emphasis being on collaboration.

“The project is a necessity to accomplish the Forest Service’s goals and the community needs, while protecting water quality,” George Cella, engineer geologist with Lahontan, said.

One of the problems with the state water board and the federal agency working together is they overlap jurisdictions with different mandates. Lahontan’s primary concern is water quality. The Forest Service, while concerned with water quality, deals with habitat, forest health, recreation and other mandates. Lahontan only has jurisdiction in California; the Forest Service works on both sides of the state line.

“Fuels projects on the Nevada side move through the approval process much more quickly. We have completed planning, analysis, project implementation and monitoring for fuel reduction treatments on 5,000 acres in Nevada in the time it

has taken us to complete planning for South Shore. Planning for another 4,000 acres near Incline Village is nearly complete," Forest Supervisor Nancy Gibson told the Lahontan board.

Lahontan, until now, had a strict rule of not allowing mechanical equipment to be used in stream environmental zones. The thinking was the soil disturbance that would send sediment into the waterway was more of a concern than dense growth of vegetation that could spark a fire.

Looking back to the June 2007 Angora Fire that destroyed 254 houses, the burn pattern shows some of the hot spots that propelled the fire were the untreated stream areas, especially near Angora Creek.

"While SEZ treatment using mechanical equipment are new for Lahontan, the Forest Service has successfully implemented them in the Round Hill and Spooner projects on the Nevada side, and at the Heavenly Valley SEZ demonstration project on the California side," Gibson said.

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency permitted those Nevada projects.

A problem with moving projects forward in the Lake Tahoe Basin is the number of agencies involved. After the Angora Fire a bistate commission was formed to develop protocols. One of the mandates from the May 2008 documents was to create a streamlined approach to permitting. The purpose was to speed things along – in particular the treatment of hazardous fuels.

That has not happened.

While Lahontan and TRPA created a memorandum of understanding that called for TRPA to issue permits, that was challenged in court. Thus, the reason Lahontan is part of the process.

Fire management in Tahoe

One of the problems with fires in the Lake Tahoe Basin is that only 25 percent of them are weather related. This means the bulk are from causes like errant campfires (Angora Fire), cigarettes being discarded (Gondola Fire) or some other unpredictable cause.

Gibson, who this week is marking her one-year anniversary of being in charge of the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, said the forest she came from on the North Coast had the opposite ratio. Lightning was a huge ignition source, which meant by monitoring the weather, fire suppression resources could be allocated early.

Tahoe is also unique with so much development being in the middle of a forest. With the basin's forest abutting the urban areas, it makes fuel reduction projects all that more important.

Gibson sat down with *Lake Tahoe News* in an exclusive interview before the Lahontan board meeting to talk about fire, permitting and the future.

"Look at the expense, time and anxiety in dragging this project out," Gibson said. "In 2008, we had clear direction from the bistate fire commission to act quickly. It's the luck of the cards nothing has happened."

She worries forests will continue to become drier as the snowpack lessens and does not stick around as long because of climate change.

"The only way we are going to get ahead of it is with fuels reduction," Gibson said.

With all agencies facing financial constraints, wasting time – which equates to dollars – is no longer sustainable.

Gibson said Lahontan could have easily rolled the state environmental process into the federal.

She also said it is time to put aside past philosophical differences and look at the best course of action to decrease wildfires and ensure the forest's health.

What will be treated

Even though Lahontan extended an invitation to hundreds to see sections of the South Shore project, only 20 people were on the tour Wednesday afternoon before the meeting. And that group consisted of various agency reps and the media – no members from the general public.

Three of the six Lahontan board members were on the tour – Amy Horne, Eric Sandel and Don Jardine.

First stop was an aspen project near Taylor Creek that was treated in January. Winter thinning occurred because no snow was on the ground. Other aspen restoration projects are contained in the South Shore plans.

The tour demonstrated sites that use mechanical equipment – which includes whole tree skidding and cut to length – and hand crews.

Parsons, with the Forest Service, said a prescription for each segment is designed, which in turn says how the site should look when the project is done. Prescriptions weigh several factors, including fuels, habitat, riparian needs, types of vegetation, and slope.

Using machines speeds up the work, which in turn cuts down the expense because less time is needed. Hand crews are the ones who create the burn piles. Mechanical treatment either hauls the fuels away, or redistributes some of the matter on site. The latter to mostly deal with erosion to cover bare soil.

Martin Goldberg with Lake Valley Fire Protection District said hand crews are definitely expensive.

Stop No. 2 on the tour was behind South Tahoe High School's

shop building. Walking down the forest road to the left is an area that was not touched by the Angora Fire, but will be thinned in the South Shore project. To the right is a section that for the first couple hundred feet was treated mechanically and farther up had trees felled by hand as evidenced by the teepee-shaped burn piles.

At the end of Nez Perce Street in the North Upper Truckee neighborhood is an example of the wildland urban interface being treated nearly a decade ago. But beyond the thinned area is a creek and dense vegetation that need tending to. The road will need to be worked on and the creek crossing upgraded before rigs can be brought in to do the heavy lifting.

Goldberg said the No. 1 question he gets from homeowners is asking why they have to do defensible space when they know a few hundred feet from their structure is a fire hazard in the forest. It's the law for homeowners to have defensible space. (Goldberg used to work for Lahontan.)

"Had Angora started off Highway 50, this would have all been lost," Goldberg said of the homes in that particular area.

The last area on the field trip was off Highway 50 near the Truckee River where there is a turn out on the right side of the road heading west just before North Upper Truckee Road.

Duncan Leao with the Forest Service said, "With the absence of fire, you get sites like this."

Wood was everywhere.

Ideally, he said, an acre should have less than 10 tons of fuel. Sitting there, Leao estimated, was more than 60 tons of fuel.

To thin the area by hand would cost close to $9,000 an acre, while mechanically it would be about $3,500, officials said.

"Hand treating is out of the question. I'm not sure why we are

discussing it,” Goldberg said has he looked over the area.

This isn’t the only area in the basin, let alone the South Shore project, with this amount of buildup.

“You see this a lot near Saxon and Trout creeks. A lot of heavy fuels,” Leao said.

While the need to thin was reiterated, so was the fact that once the South Shore project is done it really isn’t. That’s because trees and other vegetation keep growing, so the need for fuel reduction projects will never go away.

The South Shore project will begin this summer.

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