

Opinion: Lessons from Angora not forgotten, more work to do

By Ted Gaines

Five years ago Sunday, the terrible Angora Fire swept through the Lake Tahoe Basin, destroying 254 homes, buildings, and changing lives and landscapes forever. While we will never be able to tame nature completely, public safety is government's highest priority and government leaders must always be improving their response to emergencies and natural disasters.

As a result of the fire, the governors of California and Nevada convened a Blue Ribbon Fire Commission to analyze the efforts to fight the Angora Fire and issued a set of recommendations to strengthen the region's ability to prevent and respond to these catastrophes.



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It does not take a cynic to assume that many blue ribbon reports and commissions come to life as a result of politicians needing to “do something” in response to a crisis and then accomplish very little. As the event fades from public consciousness, the reports gather dust and the recommendations quietly fade away.

That absolutely cannot be the case when it comes to the Lake

Tahoe region and fire safety. Tahoe's conditions – steep canyons, ample fuel, dry years such as in 2007, when the area received only 29 percent of normal precipitation, high winds – are a recipe for forest fire disaster. This year's conditions are similar and the community, rightfully, is nervous heading into fire season.

For all these reasons, I initiated a non-partisan Senate Office of Research review of the Blue Ribbon Fire Commission recommendations to check their status. I am disappointed to issue a C-minus grade, but inspired to keep working for greater safety for the region.

Things are better than they were five years ago. Thanks to the successful implementation of report recommendations by the governors of California and Nevada, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board, U.S. Forest Service Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, CalFire and other stakeholders, we now have more effective forest management, better education, and better cooperation and communication among regional fire protection agencies, all of which should lessen the chance of catastrophic forest fires.

But there is still work to do and the area is still a tinderbox. Many of the recommendations have not been implemented or their status is unclear. We cannot leave them undone, and must continue to effectively implement the recommendations in progress, both for public safety and for the continued health of the Tahoe regional economy.

Lake Tahoe is Northern California's crown jewel and its economy is heavily dependent on tourism. The barren moonscape left behind after the fire is no match for the rich forest lands destroyed in the fire. Charred trees and driveways leading to empty lots where homes have not been rebuilt still dot the landscape. Changes in erosion threaten the Lake's legendary clarity that draws people from around the world. Tahoe has to be safe and beautiful to remain a first-class

destination.

While we are all thankful for the protection firefighters provide, each of us must also take personal responsibility for fire safety. It is critical that we exercise extreme caution with cigarettes, campfires, tools, engines or anything else that could possibly spark or otherwise cause a fire – which is how the Angora Fire began. When fires inevitably start, homeowners will always be the first line of defense. There is no substitute for defensible space around a home. Be vigilant and clear out brush at least 100 feet around your house, if possible. It is my hope that effective execution of the recommendations and smart individual actions mean we can observe an anniversary this year, and not a reenactment.

On this fifth anniversary, I also want to recognize the fantastic performance of the firefighters who ultimately controlled the Angora Fire. They are a battle tested group whose bravery and excellence is unmatched around the country. By implementing the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Fire Commission, governments are helping to ensure that their lives are not needlessly put at risk.

Ted Gaines represents the 1st Senate District, which includes all or parts of El Dorado, Placer, Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Lassen, Modoc, Mono, Nevada, Plumas, Sacramento and Sierra counties.

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Note: State Sen. Ted Gaines is hosting a forum about the Angora Fire on June 25, 6-8pm at South Tahoe High School.