

Calif., Nev. recommit to focus on Tahoe fire issues

By Kathryn Reed

"With all of the major fires burning across California, and the corresponding inundation of smoke in the Tahoe basin, complacency is at an all time low again."

And that has Gareth Harris, chief of Lake Valley Fire Protection District, worried. His colleagues throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin are worried as well.

Most people in the firefighting world would like to see more resources devoted to prevention because that is more effective in terms of manpower, resources and forest health compared to suppressing a fire once it has ignited.

Even though the South Shore lost 254 houses in June 2007 to the Angora Fire, it has left people questioning why the U.S. Forest Service has embarked on a multi-year project to thin 10,000 acres here.

While the Forest Service's forest, fuels and fire management policies have changed through the years with much debate and criticism, fire officials in other agencies are on board with the belief that prevention is key. Political figures agree.



Govs. Jerry Brown, left, and

Brian Sandoval at the Aug.
19 Lake Tahoe Environmental
Summit. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Govs. Jerry Brown and Brian Sandoval re-upped that commitment a week ago before the Lake Tahoe Environmental Summit at Sand Harbor. A bi-state fire commission was convened in 2008 after the Angora Fire to look into what could be done to prevent another such devastating fire in the basin. Many of the findings are in place.

With the California and Nevada governors signing the proclamation, it reaffirmed the states' commitment to recognizing the importance of fire prevention, and the effects a fire could have on the environment and economy of Tahoe.

Most of the basin's fire chiefs were in the front row at the summit. And while people like Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., each year point to the need for a healthy forest, those that appropriate money to make that happen aren't always in agreement, nor are individuals in the basin doing what they can via defensible space techniques.

Keeping fire issues in the front of people's minds is what fire officials hope is one of the outcomes of the proclamation.

"It's important because it refocuses and keeps awareness of the Tahoe basin and the needs we have to protect our resources and our jewel here," Eric Guevin with Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District said of the agreement. "Some of that is political and some of that is economic. It drives the economic engine that keeps these prevention programs in place so we can do much more."

Money is an ongoing concern. Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act money is drying up. And it's not cheap to do these projects.

In fiscal year 2012-13, the USFS spent almost \$800,000 on hazardous fuel reduction projects on nonfederal lands, about \$500,000 went to residents and landowners through the California Fire Safe Council, and approximately \$1.67 million was given to South Tahoe Public Utility District to improve water systems for fire protection.

“One of the biggest issues which a number of the points in the proclamation address is funding for fuel reduction projects. We have the crews ready to work, we have the plan in place, we have regulatory approval, we just need sustainable funding sources in order to get the fuels reduction work done. Reauthorization of the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act would represent a substantial move in the right direction,” Harris told *Lake Tahoe News*.