Cameras circling Lake Tahoe would warn of fires

By Associated Press

RENO — Nevada scientists working to expand early earthquake warning systems around Lake Tahoe are developing new plans to eventually ring the mountain lake's basin with a network of cameras to help alert authorities to potentially disastrous wildfires.

Researchers are seeking private funding to substantially expand the system after a pilot program conducted by the University of Nevada's Seismological Laboratory was determined to be an encouraging success.

"In the end, we envision encircling the basin so you can see the entire basin," Graham Kent, director of the seismology lab, told the *Reno Gazette-Journal*. "We feel this is a very important thing."

Like an automated version of the manned fire lookouts used for decades to protect vulnerable forests from fire, the cameras are designed to alert officials that a fire has started, allowing them to send firefighters to the scene before it gets big.

The first device, also outfitted with a seismometer, was installed in July 2013 as part of an effort to expand the seismology lab's seismic network. Two more were installed last summer, and a fourth should be installed near Homewood in a week or so.

The stations employ a wireless, digital microwave communication system that can also be useful in obtaining weather data and in atmospheric and other environmental studies, Kent said.

Their potential usefulness in detecting fire was evident last August when a U.S. Forest Service official was testing one installed in the mountains above Tahoe's east shore to scan an area that had been hit by lightning over a span of several days.

Mac Heller of the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit of the U.S. Forest Service spied thin wisps of smoke and contacted firefighters, who found and contained a half-acre wildland fire near Spooner Summit. "Who knows how big the Spooner fire would have been if it had been reported later or the next day or so?" Heller said.

There's no way to know for sure, but Kent suspects that had the camera system been in place in June 2007, the Angora Fire might have been stopped before it whipped into an inferno that destroyed 254 homes on the South Shore.

"The fire this system is built to detect is the Angora Fire," Kent said. "That fire smoldered for hours before it took off. Even the smallest fire is super-apparent, and that thing would have been super-apparent for much of the day.

"This system will have the potential of jumping on fires and the majority, if not all, will be discovered early."

Lake Tahoe's fire chiefs have been briefed on the program and are impressed with what they learned, said Mike Brown, chief of the North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District.

"What they have to offer is awesome when it comes to early detection," Brown said, agreeing that the cameras might have made a big difference during the Angora Fire.

Officials at REMSA, a paramedic and ambulance service in the region, say the cameras could also be useful in providing a real-time look at Tahoe weather conditions prior to flights of Careflight medical helicopters, Kent said. The cameras — which are controlled remotely by computer and can tilt, pan and zoom

— have been used this fall to monitor controlled burns and the smoke they create.

Kent and colleagues envision installing the camera stations at 15 additional locations at a cost of about $2 million. While grants might cover some of the cost, they are hopeful private donations could provide needed money at an accelerated schedule. The lab's fundraising campaign is called, "AlertTAHOE."