

Opinion: Preparing for the inevitable wildfire

By Chris Anthony

With the looming expectation of another year of drought, our communities face another challenging year of wildfire threat.

January finished as one of the driest Januaries on record, and while the recent storms were welcomed, they did little to increase snowpack throughout the state. As a result, fire agencies are preparing for another long fire season.

“The drought has set the stage for another busy fire season,” said Michael Brown, fire chief for North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District. “All the federal, state and local fire agencies are working together to protect the people, property and unique natural resources within the Lake Tahoe Basin.”

In 2014, there were over 1,000 more wildfires in California than the previous year. In fact, fire season never really ended.

The fuels that burn in wildfires, such as grass, brush and trees, remained extremely dry and susceptible to ignition all year. This year is looking to be no different. As an example, the Round Fire, which started on Feb. 6 just north of the town of Bishop, quickly consumed 7,000 acres and destroyed 40 structures.

“A fire of this significance in the month of February should raise our awareness and lead to positive actions to prepare our communities for fire,” said Tim Alameda, fire chief for Meeks Bay Fire Protection District.

Depending on where we live in the United States, natural destructive forces abound, whether they are hurricanes,

tornados, earthquakes, floods or fire. It is certainly no secret that we live in an environment where large damaging and costly wildfires occur on a routine basis. While the odds may not seem to be in our favor, our communities can adapt to the threat of wildfire and we can diminish the risks to our livelihood.

“A fire adapted community is one in which the community places a high priority on the common vulnerability to destruction by wildfire,” said Elwood Miller of the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension. “The adapted community is one that includes the perspective of wildfire threat, and the high probability of serious loss, as a routine way of viewing and characterizing the community. As a result we change our behavior and implement measures to mitigate the threat.”

“We can’t do this alone,” said Fire Chief Michael Schwartz of the North Tahoe Fire Protection District. “Motivated residents who work with their neighbors and local fire department to prepare their communities for fire is the key to a successful outcome when wildfire strikes.”

A fire adapted community can survive a wildfire with little or no assistance from firefighters. These communities are characterized by homes that are modified to reduce the chance of ignition and where vegetation and flammable items have been reduced around a home to provide good defensible space. A fire adapted community is buffered by fuel breaks where flammable vegetation has been modified to slow the spread of flames and provide a zone where firefighters can aggressively fight a fire.

“When wildfire comes, fire adapted communities reduce the potential for loss of human life and injury, minimize damage to homes and infrastructure and reduce firefighting costs,” added Miller. “For more information on Fire Adapted Communities, I encourage everyone visit our website.”

Chris Anthony is a division chief with CalFire. He is writing on behalf of the Tahoe Fire & Fuels Team.