

Officials: Public needs to be engaged because threat of catastrophic fires keeps growing



The Angora Fire destroyed 254 houses on the South Shore in 2007.
Photo/Lake Valley Fire

By Linda Fine Conaboy

RENO – It may seem nonsensical to be thinking about wildland fire now that snow has fallen and skiers are gearing up for the season. But putting 2015's fire year to bed and preparing to confront 2016 head-on with a new action plan is what the Nevada Network of Fire Adapted Communities aims to do. And to their way of thinking, the time is now, not when fire is again an ugly threat.

The University of Nevada Cooperative Extension's Living with Fire Program hosted its second annual conference this week at the Atlantis hotel-casino in Reno.

“Our forests are not museums just sitting out there,” Elwood Miller, the event coordinator, said. “They are changing. We must learn to live with fire, not continually suppress it. It’s a part of our natural world, like wind, rain and sun. Fire is an enormous issue, particularly in the West.”

In 2015, Miller said, 9.5 million acres burned with costs chewing through more than half of the U.S. Forest Service annual budget, costing upward of \$4 billion and going higher.

“We cannot afford this. Last year was a perfect storm of threat, devastation and destruction,” Miller said. “Collaboration is the foundation of the national wildfire cohesive strategy, with a sustainable partnership containing a common goal, equal footing among the stakeholders and a sense of mutual obligation.”

According to each of the speakers, fire is a natural element; however, it is beginning to exhibit behaviors not seen before.

“We have unbounded development—an invasion of people, which is not compatible with fire,” Miller said.



The Super Scooper is a new tool in the U.S. Forest Service’s box of suppression. Photo/LTN file

The collective wisdom of each of Monday’s speakers allowed that fires occur naturally about every century and the burn is a good thing for the forests. But now, Miller said, fires are

hotter, bigger and faster than ever before and firefighters are being asked to risk their lives to fight them.

"We should let fire play more of a role, but we also need to keep people safe," he said.

Miller mentioned the Native American view of fire in the wild—a fire will let you know when it's ready to be fought. Consequently, there is little loss of life on Indian land, he said.

Many recent Western wildfires were discussed, including the devastating 2012 Waldo Canyon Fire in Colorado. Miller said in this disaster the recipe for death and destruction was in place: high temperatures, high winds and low humidity.

The fire covered more than 18,000 acres, caused the evacuation of 32,000 people, destroyed 346 homes and resulted in insurance claims of more than \$450 million.

The largest fire in Washington state's history and described in detail by Carlene Anders, executive director of the Carlton Complex Long Term Recovery Group, occurred in July 2014.

In an emotional talk, Anders said the fire moved in a massive tidal wave, first burning sagebrush, then bitter brush and finally trees. To add to the misery a fierce rainstorm began, not enough to douse the fire, but not letting up until considerable destruction occurred from the downpour.

"The impact of the fire is immense," Anders said. "Now we're facing going on two years of cascading effects. People still have emotional issues, we lost our tourist base, and wildlife has been decimated. Nearly 750,000 acres burned. We're now having to do surveys to re-establish property lines.

"You will never be made whole again after a fire," she said. But her sense of humor showed itself when she laughed and said, "Amazingly, not one marijuana crop was lost."

Along with the fact that fire is a natural element and suppression is not always the best medicine, speakers concluded that not everything can be saved by the fire department. Most agreed that the reality is people must learn to protect themselves.

How can individuals keep fire from knocking on our doors? By creating defensible space around their properties and removing debris from forest floors.



Mike Brown

Mike Brown, North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District's chief, said everybody has a fire problem, cities as well forest communities; however, some of those city folk don't agree.

"Think about the Caughlin Fire and the Washoe Drive Fire [both in Washoe County]," he said. "In the Caughlin Fire, embers were blowing around the city, setting fire to people's junipers. We all need to be responsible to take care of our property. Fuel beds [like junipers] are susceptible to embers.

"Citizens must realize they have a responsibility to prevent fires. People need to assist us so we can assist them. They must be engaged with their firefighters, get to know them. We all need to be educated."

He commented on the 2007 Angora Fire on the outskirts of South Lake Tahoe, which he was a part of. There were 254 homes destroyed, \$11.7 million in direct firefighting costs and \$1 billion in lost tourist trade. It took nine days to knock down the fire—some people have rebuilt, but not everyone.

Firefighters will do everything possible to fight a fire, Brown said, including triage work. We make decisions on what we can defend, we train and we know our objectives.

“Safety and suppression is our No. 1 issue. But we don’t have enough suppression personnel to put someone in front of everyone’s home. Fire doesn’t discriminate. We decide what’s savable and what’s defensible,” Brown said. “Suppression costs are surging and insurance companies are starting to decline coverage in some areas.”

He described the hidden logistics involved in fighting the recent massive and lengthy fires that have happened in the West –things like food, toilets, laundry, security, medical personnel, helicopters, securing local water for suppression and housing among myriad details.

Brown said this is why everyone needs to work together to establish fire-adaptive communities.

The free conference drew people from all venues committed to establishing fire-adapted communities. Attendees included community leaders, homeowners, governmental officials, landscape professionals and others representing volunteer firefighting groups as well as fire professionals.

When asked what she would take away from her day at the conference, Julie Habara from Reno said she attended because she’s an interested homeowner and thought this would be a good way to get fire information for both she and her neighbors.

“The sessions expanded my expectations. I think every resident should have this knowledge; it’s good for the community at large. I think the awareness of what I need for emergency preparedness, like cleaning up my yard, defensible space, maintaining my property in excellent condition and having emergency contact information is vital,” Habara said.

A fire-adapted community is one located in a fire-prone area

that requires little assistance from firefighters during a wildfire. These residents know the dangers of living in a potentially hazardous area and understand that the responsibility for living there is theirs. Additionally, they have educated themselves and learned the skills needed to survive wildfire. They know that they must evacuate early and effectively and how to survive if trapped.

Like every state, Nevada has specific rules and regulations pertaining to insurance, all covered succinctly by Rajat Jain, chief insurance examiner in the property and casualty section for the Nevada Division of Insurance.

State Forester Bob Roper said that fire-adapted communities represent a culture change, something that takes time to achieve. It doesn't happen overnight, he said, but "we try to get everyone who's a stakeholder to understand their roles."

According to Roper, government involvement is not the answer; the public is the No. 1 ingredient in fire strategy.

The steps to make a community fire safe are:

- Remove the huge fuel loads that have been allowed to accumulate in the forests
- Create defensible space
- To improve smoke management determine the proper time to do prescribed burns
- Ensure communities become fire adaptive so that structures can survive fire.

"Fires don't respect jurisdictional lines. We can't let those barriers inhibit success," Roper said.

He added there needs to be better fire-response times and to make sure that the closest resource is the one that responds to a fire.

Alicia Reban, executive director of the Nevada Land Trust said her agency was established to preserve the open spaces in Nevada for people and wildlife. The group has three goals: land restoration and stewardship, education, and acquisition. To that end she says there's a big need for fire-adaptive communities.

"We want to bring all the stakeholders together and not simply apply Band-Aids after a fire," she said.

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Notes:

· For more information on this program or to join the Fire Adapted Communities Network, go **online** or call 775.784.4848.