Opinion: Importance of being fire safe

By Joanne Marchetta

June is wildfire awareness month at Lake Tahoe. And nine years later, the 2007 Angora Fire remains a vivid reminder that wildfire is one of the greatest threats facing our environment, our homes, and our businesses. We must prepare accordingly.



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Our region continues to take important steps to manage that wildfire threat, improve the health of our forests, and create fire adapted communities that are prepared for the next wildfire at Tahoe. But there is more work to do.

Last winter's snowpack brought much-needed moisture to our region. But wildfire risk in the Sierra Nevada is greater than ever. Literally millions of acres of forests to our south are a sea of standing brown casualties. Forests are seeing unprecedented tree mortality because of drought and beetle infestations—major challenges that add fuel to our wildfire risk and will only increase as our climate continues to warm.

Adding to these challenges, past logging practices and a century of wildfire suppression have left our forests unnaturally thick and overgrown and at greater risk for

catastrophic wildfire once a fire ignites.

We are not alone in facing this threat. Throughout the American West, wildfires are burning at intensities and sizes never before seen. A fire with the magnitude of the recent Rim or King fires would devastate our watershed, our forests, and our communities at Lake Tahoe.

TRPA, CalFire, the U.S. Forest Service, local fire protection districts, and other agencies on the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team are working together to prevent such wildfires, implementing projects to reduce hazardous fuel loads in our forests to restore our region to a natural cycle where smaller, lower-intensity wildfires can perform their important ecological functions but not burn out of control.

By coordinating projects and working together, the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team has reduced hazardous fuels on more than 60,000 of the 117,000 acres of forest surrounding our communities. We are working to treat the rest of this high-risk wildland urban interface over the next five to 10 years, and to develop a strategy to scale up these fuel reduction projects to treat other more remote areas in the Tahoe Basin.

This work by public agencies is crucial for forest health and resiliency in the face of our warming climate. Residents and visitors too have equally important roles to play in wildfire prevention and preparedness and the creation of fire adapted communities.

More than 90 percent of wildfires at Lake Tahoe are human caused and easily preventable with a little care. A new outreach campaign launching this month asks everyone, residents and visitors, to “Think First to Keep Tahoe Fire Safe.” The campaign reminds all of us that there are simple steps we can and must take to prevent and prepare for the next wildfire at Lake Tahoe.

To the millions of people who visit our region to enjoy its

natural splendor and limitless outdoor recreation opportunities, first and foremost, please remember you are visiting a fire-prone area. Be responsible with campfires. Enjoy them only where and when they are allowed, keep a watchful eye on them, and make sure they are put out.

To all our residents and second homeowners, please work with your local fire department to create adequate defensible space around your homes. TRPA supports all properties having defensible space, so please rake up leaves and pine needles, clear out brush and ladder fuels, clean your roofs, and upgrade your homes with ignition-resistant materials as much as possible. And don't forget, we all need a family plan to evacuate before the need arises.

As summer arrives at Tahoe, please visit the **new website** to learn more about wildfire prevention and preparedness and find links to important information. Sign the pledge to "Think First to Keep Tahoe Fire Safe" and share the information with your family and friends and neighbors. The time to prevent and prepare for the next wildfire is now.

The Angora Fire in 2007 showed what one illegal, unattended campfire can do at Lake Tahoe. Thin wisps of smoke quickly grew into billowing clouds with ash and falling embers as the wildfire spread, burning 3,100 acres of forest, destroying more than 250 homes, and causing millions of dollars in property damage. We know we live in an area with a natural wildfire hazard, and we know how that hazard can quickly materialize with grave consequences for our environment and our communities. Let's continue to work together to "Think First to Keep Tahoe Fire Safe" and prepare for that risk as best we can.

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