Cadets learn wildland fire skills in the field



U.S. Forest Service firefighter Elsa Gaule instructs fire academy cadets May 3 on how to build a line to prevent the progression of a wildland fire. Photos/Leona Allen

By Kathryn Reed

Fighting a wildland fire is nothing like a structure fire.

The tools are different, the terrain is not the same and the amount of time it might take to knock down the fire could be the difference between days and hours.

It’s a skill unto itself.

That is why a component of the Lake Tahoe Basin Fire Academy is wildland fire training.

The 24 cadets, who are set to graduate at the end of June, spent Saturday putting to practice much of what they have been learning in the classroom when it comes to fighting a wildland fire. All day May 3 they were cutting lines on Spooner Summit.

“They need the ability to cut vegetation, wherever that is. It doesn’t have to be a forest,” Leona Allen, who coordinates much of the academy operations, told *Lake Tahoe News*.



U.S. Forest Service firefighter Corey Buckley checks to make sure cadets are correctly using their fire shelters.

Then they worked on deploying shelters, having to think about where the safe zone is if the fire is racing uphill – because fire travels so much faster uphill.

Successful completion of this section of the academy earns them a certificate in basic wildland firefighting. It’s not uncommon for a cadet or two to get picked up by an outfit before they graduate.

“They have to go through several sections of classes that all together are part of the basic wildland certificate. It includes everything from basic wildland skills, tools used in wildland fires, weather, fire behavior and a leadership class,” Allen said.

Leadership, while always important in the fire world, is even

more critical on a wildland fire because crews can be so spread apart. It’s very much a team concept, where everyone has one person they report to so there is structure among the ranks.

The cadets must become proficient with the tools involved in wildland fires. They include a Pulaski, which looks like an ax that is turned sideways. They can dig and chop with it.

“They can chop manzanita or another deep rooted shrub out of the ground to remove the fuel,” Allen explained.

There is the McLeod, which is like a big square rake, shovels and a combi tool that is used mostly for digging.



Cadets run uphill with fire shelters to escape from fire in a scenario from their wildland fire training.

Adeptly being able to wield a chain saw is a higher-level skill that firefighters can achieve. Then they would be known as a sawyer.

The Tahoe academy uses the national model so then the cadets could work anywhere – not just California. People who do this type of work for a living teach courses.

“We are serious about this training because it’s all about your safety. I don’t want to have to knock on your door and

explain to your parents, your spouse or your children that you won’t be coming home ever again,” Forest Service Capt. John Chester told the cadets.

CalFire also has training, but it would not allow cadets to be hired right out of the academy with the U.S. Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management or out of state. However, it’s likely next year with changes to the CalFire curriculum it will be incorporated into what the academy at Lake Tahoe Community College offers.

Plenty more training is available, including command classes and other specialties. Wildland firefighting isn’t just about being on the line. Firefighters are on engines, work as prevention officers, and are in helicopters as well as airplanes.

The need for skilled wildland firefighters is expected to be even greater this fire season because of how dry everything is as the drought continues to persist in much of the West.

“I hope everybody takes to heart that we are hotter and drier earlier than normal and fire danger is imminent,” Allen said. She lost her house once – in June 2007 during the Angora Fire – and is ready if things go sideways this year.

In early April a small wildland fire was quickly extinguished by the U.S. Forest Service and Lake Valley firefighters. (Allen works for Lake Valley as the public information officer.)

“The majority of fires are human caused. Where we need to start is with prevention. Behind that, good defensible space; good evacuation skills for your family; and preparedness in general,” Allen said.

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Notes:

• Lake Tahoe Basin Fire Academy graduation is June 28 at noon in the Duke Theater at Lake Tahoe Community College.

• For those interested in the academy, there is a mandatory orientation Aug. 7 at 6pm. For more info, email lallen@mail.ltcc.edu or call 530.544.4660, ext. 540. The program is twice a week from September to June.

Editorial: Fire prevention projects save money in long run

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the April 29, 2014, Bakersfield Californian.***

It's the classic pay-me-now or pay-me-later situation.

A study released this month by the U.S. Forest Service, the Nature Conservancy and the Sierra Nevada Conservancy confirmed that treating fire-prone forests in the Sierra to prevent the increasingly prevalent "megafires" would have benefits worth two to three times the cost.

The study bolsters the case for a plan before Congress that would protect funding for critical fire prevention and restoration programs that have been short-changed in recent years to pay for fighting fires.

With the number and size of massive wildfires expected to increase again this year because of warming temperatures and drought in the West, it's more important than ever that forest managers have the money they need for thinning overgrown forests and conducting controlled burns while they have the

opportunity.

That’s particularly true at Lake Tahoe, where wildfire is considered the No. 1 threat to the clarity of the lake.

Read the whole story

Historian, author to give talk at LTCC

Historian, educator, lifelong Sierra Nevada resident and author Gary Noy comes to Lake Tahoe Community College on May 9 at 7pm.

He’ll read selections from his latest book “Sierra Stories: Tales of Dreamers, Schemers, Bigots and Rogues”, answer audience questions, and sign copies of his books. The talk will be in the board room.

This event is sponsored by Lake Tahoe Historical Society and Lake Tahoe Community College Library.

For more information, contact Lisa Foley at 530.541.4660, ext. 233 or foley@ltcc.edu.

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



• Fourteen Tahoe Douglas firefighters were recently recognized with service awards, with a special note for 20 years of service for Battalion Chief Jim Antti and Capt. Chuck Salerno.

• Lake Tahoe Environmental Science Magnet in Meyers has been selected a California Distinguished School. The award highlights exemplary schools that use innovative approaches to improving academic achievement for all students, regardless of their background, condition or circumstances.

• Washoe County will have a Crime Prevention and Safety Fair at the Pleasant Valley Volunteer Fire Department on May 10 from 10am-2pm.

• Lake Tahoe Community College's demonstration garden cleanup day is May 7 from 11am-4pm. Bring gloves and garden tools.

• Here are the roadwork schedules from Caltrans – El Dorado-Tahoe, Sierra.

• It's waterfall season in Lake Tahoe. Check out this video of Glen Alpine Falls shot by First Tracks Productions.

Letter: Harrah's-Harveys spend day at Bread & Broth

To the community,

Harrah’s-Harveys HERO members who volunteered at Bread & Broth’s dinner April 28 came prepared to work hard and make sure that the evening’s diners were warmly welcomed, served heaping portions of barbecue roasted chicken and given bags of food and leftovers to go before they left.

HERO is an employee-based program at Caesars casinos that encourages employees to participate in charitable events within their community. Fortunately for Bread & Broth, the Harrah’s/Harveys HERO members choose to host a B&B “Adopt a Day of Nourishment” sponsorship.

“It was so much fun. We would all do it again,” said Stephanie Bartholomew, a Harrah’s/Harveys’ games supervisor.

In addition to Bartholomew, the fun and friendly HEROs volunteers included Cindy Walker, Steve Campbell, Randy Sumner and Jackie Andrews. They particularly enjoyed working the serving line and had smiles for the guests.

Bread & Broth would like to thank and compliment Caesars for encouraging their employees to make a positive impact and help meet the needs of their community by participating in charitable events, such as feeding the less fortunate through B&B’s meal program.

For more B&B information, visit go online or find us on Facebook.

Carol Gerard, Bread & Broth

USFS firefighting tanker

fleet inadequate

By Michael R. Blood, AP

LOS ANGELES — With a vast swath of the West primed for wildfires, federal foresters are preparing for the worst with a budget that might run dry and a fleet of air tankers that in some cases aren't ready for takeoff.

A combination of extended drought, warming weather and an abundance of withered trees and grasses have created ideal conditions for fire — more than 22 million acres were blackened by wildfires from 2011-13, primarily across the West.

"It looks like it's going to be a serious enough season to where we run out of money again," Tom Harbour, director of fire and aviation management for the U.S. Forest Service, warned in an interview with the Associated Press.

"I'm really concerned, there is no question," Harbour said. "I think we are going to have a lot of fire."

The agency is doing what it can to prepare for wildfire season by burning sections of forest in high-risk areas to remove dead or dry vegetation that could fuel a fire. In another step, crews will launch a major forest-thinning project on Lake Tahoe's North Shore.

In no place is the situation more worrisome than in California, where several years of stingy rainfall have turned forests and scrub into matchsticks and tens of thousands of homes are perched along fire-prone areas.

Firefighters battled a blaze in the mountains east of Los Angeles last week, where temperatures neared triple digits. And states from New Mexico through southern Oregon have been left sere by a lack of rain and snow.

But even as fire risk has increased in recent years, the number of large air tankers dropped.

About a decade ago the Forest Service had more than 40 of the big tankers at its disposal – the draft horses of firefighting aircraft that can dump thousands of gallons of flame-snuffing retardant in a single swoop, far more than a helicopter.

According to federal analysts, the fleet hit a low of eight aircraft at one point last year, depleted by age and concerns over the ability of the planes, in some cases flying since the dawn of the Cold War, to stay in the sky.

Deadly crashes – including when a 57-year-old tanker flew into the side of a Utah mountain in June 2012, killing the pilot and co-pilot – fanned doubts about safety. A federal investigation into the cause of that crash is incomplete.

The agency has been working for several years to modernize its creaky fleet of tankers, with checkered results.

The core of the fleet was expected to include 17 aircraft for 2014, but seven of those planes aren’t ready to fly.

The fleet is anchored to eight aircraft with an average age of half a century. As part of a modernization blueprint, the Forest Service contracted last year for seven newer tankers that can fly twice as fast as the older planes and carry larger payloads, but only two are on the runway.

The others are eight months late on delivery. Among the issues: The tankers have yet to obtain Federal Aviation Administration certification, a requirement to fly.

The agency hopes to have all the tankers off the ground by summer, but Sen. Mark Udall, D-Colo., has called the delay unacceptable.

“These tankers promised to be a game-changer for Western communities grappling with the perennial threat of modern

mega-fires," Udall wrote to the Forest Service in April. "I am deeply concerned that delivery of the remaining five will be further delayed and unavailable for the 2014 wildfire season."

Federal studies suggest the agency needs as many as 28 of the newer, faster tankers, but that target remains years away.

Meanwhile, plans for two other large tankers have been sidelined by a dispute over a contract that called for paying up to $496 million over nine years to a Montana company for exclusive use of two aircraft. A decision has not been made whether to scrap the deal or try to fix it.

In another glitch, federal legislation gave the Forest Service the authority to obtain up to five extra air tankers, but didn't provide the funds to lease them.

The agency can also draw on eight military tankers, if needed. Eight others can be dispatched from Alaska and Canada, but those are not always available.

Federal foresters are moving earlier this year to get firefighters and equipment into threatened areas.

"We are going to be looking at the weather and conditions … and move things as we need to, to try to head things off before they get ahead of us," said agency spokesman Mike Ferris.

The Forest Service does not own the large tankers but strikes agreements with aviation companies that buy used aircraft, modify them for firefighting duty and then offer them for government lease. The agency also leases helicopters and smaller aircraft to douse fires.

The up-and-down pursuit of a faster, more reliable tanker fleet has played out against a backdrop of increasingly destructive blazes.

From 2000 to 2008, at least 10 states had fires of record-

breaking size. In 2011, a wildfire scorched 538,000 acres in Arizona and New Mexico, an area so large it would cover much of the state of Rhode Island.

Costs for daily air tanker availability doubled from $15 million in 2007 to $33 million in 2010. Meanwhile, the cost of fighting wildfires has soared, up from 13 percent of the agency's budget a decade ago to over 40 percent. That's forced the agency to strip funds from other programs to keep up, officials say.

A government report last week said federal agencies expect to spend $1.8 billion fighting wildfires this year, but that's $470 million more than what's available for the job.

When homes or lives are lost, the Forest Service often faces questions about a lack of tankers, or how it uses them.

Shortly before 19 members of a firefighting Hotshot crew were killed in Arizona last year, records showed officials summoned six air tankers, but none arrived because of the limited number of tankers in the fleet and dangerous weather conditions. Fire officials said even if the big planes were available, winds were so strong they couldn't have been used to save the firefighters. Among recommendations after the deaths, investigators said more instructions were needed for the "effective use" of the largest tankers.

As part of the commemoration of the deaths this year, Forest Service firefighters will hold discussions on risks and hazards "to avoid (a) similar outcome," Ferris said in an email.

Government studies generally agree tankers play an important role in suppressing wildfires, particularly in "initial attack" – the early stages when failure to knock down a blaze quickly can lead to an inferno.

Harbour and other experts stress that the biggest job of

extinguishing fires remains with ground crews, since embers and brush can continue to burn after a water or retardant hit. Instances of aircraft extinguishing fire are rare.

In another move by Congress, the Forest Service would receive seven, large HC-130 aircraft from the Coast Guard for firefighting. But it could be at least 2017 before they are all modified to carry retardant.

For now, the planes remain with the Coast Guard, even though the law aimed to have them transferred months ago.

“Is there part of me that hopes, starting July 4, it starts raining?” Harbour asked. “You bet.”

Spaghetti feed benefits TAP

Bert’s Café is hosting a spaghetti night fundraiser for Tahoe Arts Project on May 8 from 5:30-7:30pm.

For $10, guests may dine on spaghetti, Caesar salad, garlic bread, soda and coffee. Wine will be served by donation. Dessert involves a bake sale.

Servers for the evening will be TAP board members and volunteers.

Purchase tickets in advance at Bert’s Café, Sessions Salon and from TAP board members. Tickets will also be available at the door and take out is also offered.

Bert’s Café is located at 1146 Emerald Bay Road in South Lake Tahoe.

Tahoe Arts Project is a nonprofit organization that presents

professional performing arts in the schools and community of South Lake Tahoe.

For more information, call Tahoe Arts Project at 530.542.3632.

Study: Walking spurs creativity

By Deborah Netburn, Los Angeles Times

Want to get creative? Get up and go for a walk.

People generate more creative ideas when they walk than when they sit, according to a study published in the Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition.

“Everyone always says going on a walk gives you new ideas, but nobody had ever proved it before,” said Marily Oppezzo, a psychology professor at Santa Clara University and the lead author of the study.

To test for creativity, Oppezzo asked volunteers (mostly college students) to come up with alternative uses for a common item like a tire or a tweezer. Creative suggestions for a button, for example, might include tiny strainer, dollhouse doorknob or the eye for a doll.

In the first experiment, volunteers were given four minutes to complete the creativity test – first while sitting at a desk in a small room, and then while walking on a treadmill. Of the

48 participants in the study, 81 percent improved their creative output when walking.

Read the whole story

Raw sewage spills into Tahoe at Keys Marina



Sewage from the Fresh Ketch restaurant spills onto a walkway before it reaches Lake Tahoe. Photo/Andrew Lubrano

By Kathryn Reed

Sewage from an overflow tank at the Fresh Ketch restaurant flowed into Lake Tahoe for at least 24 hours this weekend.

People at the restaurant first saw the spill Friday night, but Summit Plumbing of South Lake Tahoe said they didn't receive a call for service until 6:08pm May 3.

Employees with the El Dorado County Environmental Health Department went to the restaurant Saturday afternoon. Dry bleach was used on the surface areas where people frequent.

"There is not much you can do once it is in the water because algae starts taking up the nutrients. Bacteria has only a certain amount of time it can stay viable," Lauri Kemper with Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The cold temperature of the lake and sunlight would dissipate the bacteria quickly.

However, her agency will be at the Tahoe Keys Marina on Monday to take samples for bacteria.

It is near impossible to know how much sewage made its way into Lake Tahoe, but several gallons, according to witnesses.

No one from the marina or restaurant was available for comment.

The expanded outdoor seating area behind the restaurant has tables and chairs that sit over the overflow tank for the restaurant. This is where the problem was.

"We walked up and there was a very large puddle and an interesting odor. When we got up to it we saw toilet paper, etcetera coming from the old pump out station," Andrew Lubrano told *Lake Tahoe News*.

This was on May 2. He went back out the next morning and saw the problem had not been fixed. He called the 800 number for Lahontan to report the spill.

Kemper said her agency would work with the county to see what

it has found, as well as with South Tahoe Public Utility District.

“With all the facilities connected, they may need a larger tank or to maintain the lines better. They could be dumping grease. STPUD has ordinances against dumping grease into their lines,” Kemper said.

This will be the second investigation Lahontan will have involving the Tahoe Keys Marina. The other is the fueling dock. Kemper said she is not at liberty to discuss that case further at this time.

Tahoe-Baikal Institute ceases operations

The Tahoe-Baikal Institute has suspended its operations.

Lake Baikal in Russia is said to have more similarities to Lake Tahoe than any other water body. Scientists have often studied both to help the other.

The Tahoe-Baikal Institute came about in 1988 by Soviet and American students who attended a bilateral youth conference in Helsinki.

“The Tahoe-Baikal Institute gave hundreds of students like myself a genuinely once in a lifetime experience. Hearing that operations have been suspended is sad news as future young people won’t get the same opportunity,” Matt Roberston told

Lake Tahoe News. “Those of us who participated in TBI’s programs came away forever changed, inspired, and part of a remarkable global family.”

No one from the executive committee of the institute responded to inquiries so it is not known if operation might resume, how many jobs were lost or how this affects studies that were under way.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report