

TAHOE REGIONAL PLANNING AGENCY

128 Market Street
Stateline, Nevada
www.trpa.org

P.O.Box 5310
Stateline, NV 89449-5310

(775) 588-4547
Fax (775) 588-4527
Email: trpa@trpa.org

Much More Work to Be Done to Reduce Wildfire Threat at Lake Tahoe

By John Singlaub, Executive Director

Over the past six months, Lake Tahoe fire officials and government agency policy-makers have made significant progress toward clearing the way for a Lake Tahoe that will be less susceptible to catastrophic wildfire. The Angora Wildfire last summer was the worst kind of wake-up call. It told us that our past efforts to reduce forest fuels and encourage property owners to create defensible space around their homes were not good enough to prevent a disaster. To reduce the chances that it might happen again, we all had to work harder at it and that meant business as usual would not do.

The California and Nevada governors established a bi-state commission to study the problem and deliver a set of recommendations for how to deal with it. That process is expected to come to a close within the next month. Meanwhile, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency formed a Catastrophic Wildfire Prevention Committee to also examine the issue and bring forward initiatives that would help streamline defensible space efforts in the Basin in part by overseeing ordinance and policy changes requested by Tahoe area fire chiefs.

The fire chiefs were proactive and fully engaged in this process. On September 18, they signed a nine-point letter spelling out actions TRPA could take to make their fire prevention efforts easier. Work began right away to address all nine points and as of today I am pleased to report that all of the fire chief's concerns have been resolved. Only two required action by the TRPA Governing Board. To date, we have increased from 6 to 14 inches the diameter size of trees property owners can remove without a permit for defensible space purposes, cleared the way for fire agencies to dramatically increase the amount of trained personnel conducting defensible space inspections and outlined more clearly how erosion control measures on private property can be arrived at in such a way that they don't conflict with fire protection.

Additionally, funding has been secured for defensible space and fuels treatment work around the Basin beginning as soon as the snow melts this year. News of these accomplishments, certainly the result of hard work and unprecedented collaboration, has been reported in this newspaper.

We have not yet earned the privilege to publicly congratulate ourselves, however, as this is just the beginning of the hard work that must and will continue. While we are proud of what we have accomplished so far with the help of the fire chiefs and other agencies and we anticipate the bi-state fire commission's report, we cannot measure the true success of our work until months and years from now when we can say that our forests are healthier and our homes are safer.

This spring, the scarred forestlands of the Angora burn area will show signs of rebirth. Vegetation will cover scorched ground, property owners will plant new trees and an amazing amount of reconstruction will continue. In time, a few reminders will point to the fire that created such a crisis for our community. While this transformation takes hold, we must work to secure a permanent and reliable funding source for forest fuels treatment work, be steadfast in our public education and outreach efforts around defensible space, and increase the number of inspections and treatments conducted while not losing sight of our efforts to preserve and restore the lake.

This work will go on long into the future and it will require a lasting commitment from all of us.

- *John Singlaub is Executive Director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. For more information and some green building resources, visit www.trpa.org*