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NEWS RELEASE

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TRPA SETS THE RECORD STRAIGHT ABOUT TREE REMOVAL AND FOREST FUELS REDUCTION

Lake Tahoe CA/NV—In the midst of the Angora Fire tragedy at Lake Tahoe, many questions have arisen concerning tree removal rules implemented by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA). Private property owners at Lake Tahoe can do much of the work to protect their homes from fire without a permit, according to the Agency's Code of Ordinances.

The states of California and Nevada created the TRPA in 1969 to preserve Lake Tahoe's environment and set environmental standards in nine natural resource areas including vegetation.

TRPA rules allow many vegetation removal activities without a permit such as:

- Removing brush
- Removing standing dead trees (other than some in conservation-designated areas for habitat)
- Removing trees smaller than six inches diameter (other than in some stream zones/wetlands)
- Trimming limbs from the lower one-third of trees
- Trimming limbs for clearance around power lines, chimneys and for defensible space.

Under TRPA's code of ordinances, review is required for the removal of trees six inches or greater in diameter at breast height and fire districts now provide this service to the public. In an effort to promote defensible space at Lake Tahoe, TRPA has historically delegated its review authority of larger tree removal requests to local fire district partners to streamline permitting for homeowners, according to TRPA Executive Director, John Singlaub.

“We have agreements with five of the seven local fire districts around the Tahoe Basin to issue tree removal permits for fire safety and defensible space purposes,” Singlaub said. “They also offer free defensible space inspections and most offer free curbside chipping service.”

Upon request from property owners, TRPA continues to issue tree removal permits over and above those issued by local fire districts and issued 695 such permits in 2006.

In addition to the fire districts, TRPA has delegated tree removal authority to local governments, utility companies, public lands and other government agencies such as the US Forest Service.

Tree Removal in Angora Fire Area

- Sixty two tree removal permits (affecting 82 parcels) were issued between April 2003 and June 25, 2007 to property owners by TRPA or the Lake Valley Fire Protection District.
- In 2006, the Lake Valley carried out approximately 200 defensible space inspections and marked 900 trees for removal within their service area which includes the burn area.
- Approximately 400 acres had been treated for fuels reduction by the US Forest Service and other agencies.
- Reports from the ground indicate that treated areas fared better in many instances.
- Fire experts have said that no amount of defensible space on private properties could have saved all structures in the Angora Fire because of the high winds and other fire conditions.

“Fuels treatments on public lands have to be accompanied by defensible space on private properties for the treatment to be holistic,” Singlaub said. “Once a defensible space inspection is complete, it’s the responsibility of the land owner to remove the trees and sometimes the cost factor prevents closing the tree removal loop.”

Funds are available on the Nevada side of the Lake through the Nevada Fire Safe Council to help private land owners with the cost of tree removal, but there is no similar fund on the California side.

TRPA's 10-Year Focus on Fire Prevention

TRPA began its commitment to forest health and fuels reduction in the mid 1990s by streamlining procedures to support the Tahoe Re-Green Program in California. Following years of drought and bark beetle infestation, the forest was deemed at great risk of catastrophic fire. Fuels treatments have been implemented by federal, state and private property owners over the last 10 years on approximately 21,000 acres in the Tahoe Basin. However, an additional 67,000 acres need treatment.

For the past three consecutive years, the TRPA Governing Board has declared the threat of catastrophic wildfire the number one environmental concern at Lake Tahoe and TRPA's top priority. Wildfire threatens Lake Tahoe's communities as well as its natural resources including air and water quality, wildlife, and scenic resources. Working with numerous state, local, and federal agency partners, TRPA took the lead beginning in 2004 in preparing the first Fuels Reduction and Forest Restoration Plan for the Lake Tahoe Basin. The Agency amended its Code of Ordinances to allow broader use of mechanical thinning techniques and is also making strides toward using the biomass of forest fuels as a source of clean energy within the Basin.

"We all want Tahoe's forests thinned as quickly as possible," Singlaub said. "Reducing forest fuels over hundreds of square miles is going to require sustained investment from everyone."

Outreach and education are central to the mission of the Agency in promoting environmental stewardship. The "Home Landscaping Guide for the Lake Tahoe Basin," prepared by a number of agencies including TRPA, is available free of charge and is distributed throughout the community. The guide includes an entire chapter on defensible space and rates the flammability of plants for landscaping.

Pine Needles and Defensible Space

The Agency also encourages land owners to wisely combine defensible space treatment with best management practices (BMPs). BMPs are mandatory erosion control measures at Lake Tahoe which help improve water quality. Tahoe fire districts and TRPA have mutually agreed to a guideline for homeowners to clear pine needles within five feet of structures, but to cover other bare soil with either a layer of pine needles or bark mulch to keep the soil from eroding.

Homeowners also have the option to maintain a green, vegetated zone encircling their homes as a BMP.

“Despite our efforts to spread the best information, the myth that TRPA requires flammable materials remain close to homes is still a popular one to repeat,” said John Singlaub. Once pine needles have decomposed, they form a duff layer with very low ignition properties. Singlaub said the Agency has tried to assure homeowners there is no conflict between keeping homes fire safe and doing BMPs, but also acknowledged that more public information efforts are needed in this area.

Public Perception Challenges

The myth that TRPA does not allow tree removal for fire safety may stem from sensational media coverage around tree violations. Several high-profile cases involved lakefront homeowners removing or even poisoning trees to enhance views or improve property values. TRPA’s environmental standards for vegetation don’t allow tree removal simply for personal benefit. However, the Agency says that tree removal for forest health and fire safety is allowed and strongly encouraged. The Agency’s executive director also recognizes that more can be done.

“We have been open to amending policies and ordinances in an effort to better address fire safety at Lake Tahoe,” Singlaub said. “Following the Angora Fire, a robust community debate is in order to help prevent such a catastrophic event from occurring in the future.”

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is a bi-state environmental planning and regulatory agency at Lake Tahoe. Our mission is to cooperatively lead the effort to preserve, restore, and enhance the unique natural and human environment of the Lake Tahoe Region now and in the future. The Agency regulates development at Lake Tahoe and spearheads an environmental restoration program for the Tahoe Basin. For more information, contact Julie Regan at 775-589-5237 or visit www.trpa.org.

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