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County seeks money for fire buffer zones

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A proposed buffer against wildfires along the Carson Range from Reno to Douglas County could be started this year if a

\$2.4 million federal grant is approved.

Local fire agencies, the Nevada Safe Fire Council, Washoe County parks and others have applied for the grant to start building a long fire break to protect homes in the Carson Range foothills. It is the first time that forest-thinning projects outside the Tahoe Basin are being allowed to compete for money through the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act.

The change was approved by Congress last year. The money comes from the sale of federal lands in Clark County.

State and federal officials today will thin these grant requests, which total \$23 million.

The \$2.4 million request competes with those for the Tahoe Basin and Mount Charleston near Las Vegas. State and federal officials today will winnow the grant requests totaling \$23 million.

The Carson Range request would compete for part of the \$82 million available for sensitive land purchases and other projects under the act. While it could take years, the request includes almost \$1 million for Washoe County to start clearing nearly 100 years of accumulation of dead trees and other fuels on 2,000 acres of high priority areas along the western foothills.

"The grants will get you over the hump, but fuel management is going to be part of the county agenda for years to come," said Elwood Miller, founding director of the Nevada Fire Safe Council and a retired University of Nevada forestry professor, to the Washoe County Commission in a briefing Tuesday.

Sixty-six communities in Nevada are designated for extreme fire danger, with 40 percent in Washoe County, said Ed Smith, natural resource specialist with the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension.

Of 13,740 homes in Nevada at a high or extreme risk of a wildfire, 5,803 homes are in Washoe County, 4,387 in Douglas County and 23 in Carson City, according to a wildfire risk assessment prepared for the Nevada Fire Safe Council. The immediate worry in the Reno-Sparks area is the Galena forest along the Mount Rose Highway, where the grant would cover thinning. Part of the forest hasn't burned since 1910, said Mike Greene, Sierra Fire Protection District chief.

"It has the greatest potential for a catastrophic fire," Greene said.



Reno firefighters hose down a home on Solari Drive that was destroyed by a wildfire March 26, 2007. (DAVID B. PARKER/RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL)

In 2004, 17 homes burned in the Waterfall Fire in the western foothills of Carson City.

The fire buffer would be similar to a large fire break around Incline Village. The North Tahoe Fire Protection District has had workers thin 2,658 acres of forest since 1999 and use of controlled burns has cleared another 527 acres of brush since 1995.

Truckee Meadows fire officials are especially anxious this year because of insufficient rain and snowfall. Fuel conditions are at a stage normally seen in late August or early September, said Marty Scheuerman, Reno Fire Department division chief who has overseen wildland fires for nearly 30 years.

With dry fuels, flames are hotter and taller, requiring more water and fire retardant and keeping firefighters further away, he said. The department has sent swarms of engines to reports of wildfires, twice as many as in previous years.

Federal officials have warned they will bill local agencies for air support when federal lands are not involved or threatened. State and local officials are organizing the first statewide wildlands fire summit Sept. 26 in Reno.

Residents representing each Nevada Fire Safe Council chapter, fire agencies, county officials and others are being invited.