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# Reluctance to thin Tahoe forests

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WASHINGTON — The fire raging in the Lake Tahoe Basin is a stark reminder of what can happen when environmentalists and the public fight off efforts to thin the forests, a federal official who oversees the Forest Service said Tuesday at a Senate hearing.

Mark Rey, under secretary for natural resources and environment at the U.S. Agriculture Department, said basin residents and others historically have resisted the “work that needs to be done” to ensure the safety of homes in the area.

Specifically, he lamented the public’s insistence on expensive “hand treatment” of the forests rather than what he characterized as more effective mechanical methods to thin forests.

“Some days in the Tahoe Basin, I thought we’d have to hug and name every tree before we cut it,” he said at a hearing on wildfire management by the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

The League to Save Lake Tahoe, which promotes restoration efforts on the lake, says it supports the Forest Service’s efforts to thin forests to reduce the risk of catastrophic fire. But the group works to ensure that they use “environmentally sensitive methods” to minimize the impact of extraction on soil erosion and wildlife. And they want forest management programs to concentrate on fuel reduction, not logging operations.

Rey, a former timber lobbyist, said in an interview after his testimony that restrictions imposed by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board have added cost and time to thinning projects around the lake. As a result, thinning projects near the lake are among the highest in the national forest system at about \$1,500 to \$2,000 an acre, he said.

By comparison, thinning in the Deschutes National Forest in Oregon, costs about \$150 an acre. Rey said Deschutes is similar to Tahoe in that it is in a metropolitan area and involves private lands and recreational areas.

It costs about \$50 an acre for “prescribed burning” to thin the forests, he said.

In the Lake Tahoe Basin, the two agencies often insist that trees less than 14 inches in diameter not be cut, making some thinning projects ineffective and costly, according to Rey.

The permitting and paperwork process required by the agencies also add about \$200 an acre in costs for these projects, he said.

At Tuesday’s hearing, Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, said the fire near Lake Tahoe was a “largely human-caused” tragedy. He said environmentalists and others had prevented the federal government from doing the necessary thinning in the forest near the lake.

Craig predicted the West would continue to burn in the coming years.

“We will lose thousands and thousands of homes all in the name of what — a very narrow attitude about the environment expressed by some,” he said.

