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Forest thinning seen as key to preventing fires

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STATELINE -- A month after the devastating Angora Fire, leaders of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency have met with landowners, forestry experts and fire officials as efforts accelerate to protect a national landmark from blazes.

Much of Wednesday's discussion centered on forest thinning regulations affecting stream areas, where logging was restricted to protect water quality.

The 3,100-acre Angora Fire burned most explosively as it rocketed through Angora Creek, but it calmed significantly when it entered parts of the forest thinned in recent years. More than 250 homes were destroyed in the blaze.

In 2004, when the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency made avoiding catastrophic fire its top priority, the agency also relaxed regulations to allow use of mechanical equipment to thin trees in so-called "stream environment zones."

Despite that action, no significant mechanical thinning projects have occurred in Tahoe's stream areas.

El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago, who represents the area burned, said the agency can't afford to wait for next spring's recommendations by a task force on Tahoe fire danger formed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger of California and Gov. Jim Gibbons of Nevada.

"Folks, the danger is now. We can't wait for the commission," Santiago said. "I think we all agree there's a mess out there we have to clean up."

No action was taken, but Tahoe Regional Planning Agency officials agreed to consider a variety of steps soon. Placer County officials may require homeowners to establish defensible space around houses or face liens on their property.


Since 2004, the Forest Service has secured \$22 million from federal land sales near Las Vegas for that purpose and has spent \$9 million.

John Pickett, California coordinator for the Nevada Fire Safe Council, said planned thinning activity must occur, with overgrown stream areas posing a particular hazard.

"When we get through with a thinning project, it's going to look like hell for a couple of years," Pickett said.

"When we get through with a fire like this, it will look like hell for 100 years."

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