

Senators say some basin regs too onerous for fire fuels work

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Dan Thrift / Tahoe Daily Tribune / U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein addresses the audience Friday during the Lake Tahoe Forum at Sierra Nevada College in Incline Village.



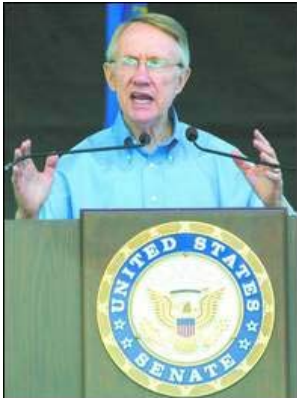
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GLENBROOK -- With tall stands of pines surrounding them, Tahoe's senators called for a temporary emergency declaration in the Lake Tahoe Basin to override regulations that hinder fuels reduction.

"The number one issue facing the basin is fire," Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev. said. "It's time to cut through the red tape."

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif. suggested declaring a temporary emergency in the Tahoe Basin after hearing a presentation in Glenbrook by the Nevada Fire Safe Council. Sens. Reid, and John Ensign, R-Nev., immediately responded to the idea and asked U.S. Forest Service Chief Gail Kimbell to set up a meeting in September in Washington for the three senators to meet and discuss the action, along with Kimbell and Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne.

Declaring an emergency in the Tahoe basin would allow the Forest Service and other fire agencies to reduce the forest fuels in the basin without going through regulatory agencies and their requirements.



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Dan Thrift / Tahoe Daily Tribune / U.S. Senator Harry Reid talks of the history of the Lake Tahoe Forum on it's 10th anniversary Friday at Sierra Nevada College in Incline Village.

The three senators, along with Rep. Dean Heller, Kempthorne and Kimbell, stopped at a fuels reduction project in Glenbrook Friday afternoon on their way to the Lake Tahoe Forum in Incline Village, where former President Bill Clinton urged a continuation of the efforts to preserve Lake Tahoe.

Dr. Elwood Miller, a forestry expert with the Nevada Safe Fire Council, pointed to a heavily wooded stream near the senators and noted that similar stream zones acted as wicks in the Angora Fire. It is an example of how regulations to protect water quality have hindered efforts to treat the forests. Thinning the heavy fuel in the forests will reduce the intensity a wild fire by helping to "keep it down, cool it down and slow it down," Miller said.

Ten years ago, during the first Lake Tahoe Presidential Forum, the emphasis was put on lake clarity, he said.

"A lot has been done to control soil erosion, but while that was going on, another threat was growing -- wildfire," Miller said. "The real challenge is finding that balance to protect the lake from erosion and to protect the lake from wildfire. Finding the balance is what slows things down."

Ensign questioned why only \$8 million of a \$30 million federal allocation for fuels reduction had been spent. Reid agreed, saying it is time for fuels reduction projects to get done.

"The number one issue facing the basin is fire. We have to do something to speed things up," Reid said.

The senators pointed to regulations by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board and even the county air quality districts which slow the efforts to treat the forests. For example, the U.S. Forest Service is limited in its controlled burns because air quality regulations prohibit burning on many days, Feinstein said.

"TRPA needs to love the forest enough to help it," Ensign said. "I don't care about the bureaucrats. I want them to get out of the way. Bottom line, there's a problem here."

Reid asked Forest Service and fire officials what they could accomplish in two years if they didn't have regulations to comply with. While fire officials enthusiastically nodded their heads in agreement, Kimbell noted that efforts could increase while still using forest management practices which are sensitive to soil erosion and water quality.

During speeches at the Lake Tahoe Forum at Sierra Nevada College later in the afternoon, the senators reiterated their concerns, with Ensign repeating the need for an emergency declaration. He mentioned the recent emergency declaration TRPA Executive Director John Singlaub made to allow fuels work to be done in the stream environment zones of the East Shore's Slaughterhouse Canyon.

"That should be the rule over the next 10 years, not the exception," he said.

Feinstein, too, talked about fuels management, calling for the TRPA and the U.S. Forest Service to streamline the permitting process.

"This is not the time for bureaucratic red tape," Feinstein said.

After the forum, TRPA's John Singlaub questioned whether legislative action would be necessary. The TRPA and the Forest Service are already working on a memorandum of understanding to streamline fuels reduction projects, he said, which will be presented to the TRPA Governing Board in the next couple of months.

He said the Slaughterhouse emergency declaration was made only because the TRPA board did not meet that month to approve it.

The June 27 meeting was cancelled due to the Angora fire, which, at the time, was burning homes and timber in the Tahoe basin.

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