

TRPA has a narrow window of opportunity

by Coe Swobe
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Because of the Angora fire and other incidents, the TRPA has a window of opportunity to make Lake Tahoe much safer from catastrophic wildfires. It has the opportunity to seriously review its regulations and permitting process in light of new environmentally sensitive mechanical equipment designed for removal of forest fuels mainly from stream zones. Further, to take advantage of this opportunity, I will ask the TRPA Governing Board at its meeting today to create a committee of board members to avoid catastrophic wildfires and to review present regulations and permitting processes for removal of forest fuels and to report its findings and recommendations to the board for action.

Recent remarks by Harold Singer, executive office of the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board, and the newly revealed mechanical equipment to remove fuels from stream zones throw a whole new light on our debates over how to scientifically and effectively avoid catastrophic fires. Special attention should be paid to recommendations of those who actually fight the fires -the forest service, local fire districts, the Nevada Fire Safe Council and scientific reports of state and national forestry organizations.

As David A. Bischel, president of the California Forestry Association so aptly stated, "Water quality reigns supreme at Tahoe. Forestry 101 teaches that healthy forests promote water quality and burning forests degrade it."

Unfortunately, there are many at Lake Tahoe who do not recognize this connection or are in denial.

Bischel further stated, "Ironically, our zealous passion for keeping sediment from reaching the lake has played a major role in producing the biggest threat to the lake's clarity in more than a century. Some organizations, in an attempt to prevent human activities from causing even tiny deposits to reach the lake, have repeatedly blocked proactive forest management. The likely unintended consequences of the actions may be that tons of mud and ashes hit the lake after a catastrophic wildfire."

This committee proposal will probably be opposed by the firmly entrenched "business as usual" advocates in the Tahoe Basin, who will state that the TRPA should wait until the newly created Governors' Fire Commission issues its report in March of 2008. My reply is that the TRPA has a virtual monopoly over regulations and permitting of the removal of forest fuels from the Tahoe Basin, and it has the obligation to formulate reasonable, cost effective regulations and permitting processes as soon as possible - and not wait for another fire season to pass.

We should take advantage of the reports of the Gondola and Angora fires and the permitting process of the Slaughterhouse Canyon/Glenbrook road and forest fuel removal application while they are still fresh in our minds.

Above all the deliberation of the committee should be open to the public and adequately noticed. And the public should be encouraged to contribute their views. The more open the procedure, the more the public will understand and appreciate any new regulations and permitting process enacted.

When then Governors Paul Laxalt and Ronald Reagan created the TRPA in 1969, they pledged "that Tahoe would not turn gray on their watch." It is my hope that the present TRPA Governing Board will take advantage of this "window of opportunity" and pledge that "Tahoe will not burn on our watch."

-- Coe Swobe is the Nevada-at-large member Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. He was a proponent of founding the agency while he was in the Nevada Legislature.

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