

Nevada ahead of California: Silver State tops the Golden State with defensible space funding

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By Adam Jensen

ajensen@tahoe-daily-tribune.com

Jim Grant / Tahoe Daily Tribune / Pine needles and over-hanging branches could be a fire hazard.



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Wildfire poses a threat to the entire Lake Tahoe Basin, but the funding available for California homeowners to implement defensible space on their properties is a far cry from what is available for Nevada homeowners.

Grant programs on the Nevada side of the basin are well-funded, but no equivalent California programs exist, and a recently proposed tax credit for the implementation of defensible space in the Golden State has been met with opposition.



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Jim Grant / Tahoe Daily Tribune / Wood is stacked against a home in the Sierra tract neighborhood.

Defensible space is the modification of areas surrounding a home to help firefighters protect a property during a wildfire.

The lack of defensible space was a contributing factor to the destruction seen during the Angora fire.

"Clearly, fewer houses would have burned had they had more effective defensible space, better access for firefighters, and contained less flammable material," according to a U.S. Forest Service assessment of the Angora fire.

Seventy percent of homes in the Lake Tahoe Basin have inadequate defensible space, according to an August presentation by Chris French, the manager of a 10-year interagency fuels management plan in the basin.

Nevada grants, administered through the Nevada Fire Safe Council, can cover two-thirds of the cost of implementing the concepts for residents of the state, and creating defensible space is not necessarily cheap.



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Jim Grant / Tahoe Daily Tribune / With over-hanging branches and pine needles on the roof and surrounding property, this home in the Al Tahoe neighborhood needs defensible space clean-up work.

Implementing defensible space costs about \$1,000 for the average home and can reach \$3,000 or more for homes on steep slopes or projects requiring the removal of large trees, according to Andrew List, executive director of the Nevada Fire Safe Council.

More than \$1 million has been spent in Nevada over the past three years on these programs, and six additional grants totaling \$312,000 are awaiting approval, List said on Thursday.

Free tree-marking programs for defensible space projects are available through South Shore fire protection districts, but there is no financial help for California homeowners in the basin to actually complete the work.

Nearly \$80,000 from Proposition 40 for such efforts on the California side of the basin was used up in 2006, List said.

"At this point we don't have any funds for defensible space work on the California side of the lake," he said.

Funds are harder to come by, at least in part, because California has more forest land and grants are more competitive than in Nevada, according to List.

A bill introduced by California Assemblyman Ted Gaines, AB 424, would have provided a tax break of up to \$500 for homeowners on the California side of the Lake Tahoe Basin to implement their defensible space, but the bill has languished in the California Senate Revenue and Taxation Committee.

"Clearing 100 feet of brush, grass, and flammable vegetation is relatively inexpensive when compared to seismically upgrading a building or strengthening a levee, and presumably is something a person would want to do regardless of a tax incentive," according to the committee's analysis.

Although the California tax credit appears to be lost for this year, re-examination of the idea is possible.

"(AB 424) got suspended. We might have to take another look at it next year, but it's done for this year," Gaines said on Thursday.

A perceived lack of support from the California government has frustrated some in the basin who are working to get more property owners to implement defensible space around their homes.

"The state of California has not paid one cent to get defensible space," said John Pickett, the California coordinator for the Nevada Fire Safe Council. "It's crazy, I've got nothing to work with. We just lost 255 homes on the California side and I've got nothing to work with."

One source of funding for California homeowners may actually come from the federal government, in the form of Round 8 Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act funds.

The act allows the sale of federal land around a specific boundary of Las Vegas to go toward environmentally beneficial projects throughout Nevada, as well as the California portion of the Lake Tahoe Basin.

The Nevada Fire Safe Council requested \$5.3 million to be spread between the basin's fire protection districts to implement community wildfire protection plans, which include defensible space on private property, according to List.

A working group committee of the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act recently reduced the funding level for the request to \$2.5 million, leaving some concerns about how rapidly defensible space can be implemented across the Lake Tahoe Basin.

If the decreased funding levels approved, "we won't be able to proceed as quickly as we need to address this emergency situation," List said.

For more information on defensible space and the funds available for homeowners to implement their defensible space, contact your local fire protection district or the Nevada Fire Safe Council at (775) 884-4455.

[BACK](#) ←