

Commission created after Angora fire says Tahoe agencies must 'get along'

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A California Department of Forestry firefighter works on a hot spot on the Angora fire in South Lake Tahoe, Calif. The bi-state commission created after the fire is issuing recommendations today about how to prevent wildfires in the basin.



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SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. — A commission established by the governors of California and Nevada after last summer's Lake Tahoe wildfire has a simple message for the overlapping agencies of the Tahoe basin: Get along.

The panel met Friday to consider dozens of recommendations to be forwarded to California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Nevada Gov. Jim Gibbons.

It voted unanimously to ask the governors and President Bush to declare a state of emergency in the basin as a way to provide immediate cash and jump-start fire-prevention programs.

Thinning overgrown forests around communities should be completed within five years and within a decade throughout the entire Tahoe basin.

The urgent action is necessary because of what the commission called the imminent threat of catastrophic wildfire, like last summer's Angora Fire. That blaze swept down a thickly forested canyon in South Lake Tahoe last June, destroying 254 homes and causing \$140 million in property damage.

The fire also exposed long-standing rivalries between the local, state, federal and regional agencies that are charged with protecting Tahoe's environment or promoting fire protection.

Earlier this week, an AP report exposed numerous examples of bureaucratic backbiting that delayed tree clearing throughout the basin, sometimes for years. More than 4,000 pages of internal documents from myriad agencies illustrated a regional planning and fire-prevention process that had degenerated into dysfunction.

The commission issued a report focusing on two agencies at the core of the criticism: the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and California's Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board.

Both agencies traditionally have made fire protection secondary to environmental protection, in particular trying to maintain the lake's clarity.

They now must recognize that in just a matter of days a wildfire can undo years of environmental progress, sending black ash and barren soil streaming into the lake.

"There is perhaps no single ... event with greater potential deleterious impact on the lake than a catastrophic wildfire," the report says in the first of its official findings.

It recommends the Lahontan water board and the regional planning agency update their policies to emphasize tree clearing, "with the priority given to protection of life, property and the environment, in that order."

Strict environmental regulations designed to protect the lake have led to forests jam-packed with spindly, unhealthy trees that can ignite quickly.

The tree density found throughout much of the Tahoe basin can lead to so-called crown fires, when flames reach the tops of trees. Such fires spread quickly and are highly destructive.

A forest filled with older, more mature trees that are spread out is better able to withstand wildfire. In such stands, fires generally burn closer to the ground and actually replenish the forest. Crown fires, like the Angora Fire, char them to a crisp.

The commission's report says the various agencies must set aside their often conflicting goals and begin cooperating. Among the key findings:

— The process to obtain tree-cutting permits must be streamlined.

— Expensive improvements must be undertaken. For example, the commission recommends increasing the capacity of the basin's water systems to better fight fires. Such projects would cost more than \$100 million and likely take 20 years, according to the report.

— Homeowners should be required to replace flammable wooden or shake-shingle roofs. On Friday, the commission said this should be done within 10 years.

— Local governments should consider taxing property owners in the basin to pay for fire-prevention programs.

The more than 4,000 pages of documents obtained by The Associated Press through state and federal freedom of information requests reflect a philosophical divide: The regional planning agency and the Lahontan water board are on one side, with the U.S. Forest Service, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and local fire districts on the other.

"Following the fire, we have really redoubled efforts to work side by side with the fire agencies," said Julie Regan, spokeswoman for Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. "The community does expect us to work together. We certainly heard that loudly and clearly."

The agency includes members from California and Nevada and receives funding from both states. Its regulations affect all the agencies, organizations and private landowners in the Tahoe basin.

The report recommends that lawmakers in California and Nevada use their control of the agency's budget to make sure it follows the recommendations.

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