



My Turn: Who will thin our forests?

By Tim Feller
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When the new California-Nevada Tahoe Basin Fire Commission recently heard from seven Tahoe area fire chiefs, the message was clear: Forests in the basin are tinderboxes and need immediate thinning to help prevent a repeat of the catastrophic Angora Fire.

We know the problem, now the question is how do we fix it - and quickly.

The answer requires cooperation and participation of government agencies, foresters and other resource professionals, loggers, biofuel facilities and sawmills, the general public and residents whose lives and homes are in harm's way.

In the aftermath of the Angora Fire, we've seen these groups work together to clean up devastated areas and set the stage for recovery. Each plays a critical role in the long-term goals of keeping the Tahoe Basin green and Lake Tahoe blue.

Working together, we must look for ways to streamline thinning projects so real fuel reduction takes place with appropriate safeguards and environmental protection.

Equipment used for fuel reduction is now technologically advanced. With a lighter touch on the land, the result is far less disturbance to the environment. This method minimizes potential project sediments and future wild fire sediments from reaching the lake.

Experienced foresters need the latitude to make meaningful resource decisions to reduce forests fuels, protect communities and other resource values. We must accept short-term disturbance to prevent the long-term devastating impacts that wildfires create.

That means we need to move toward a forest with trees of all ages. Such a forest includes opening the forest landscape by spacing trees, which drops a fire from the treetops to the ground, greatly aiding fire-suppression efforts.

Trees removed in thinning operations provide necessary wood products while generating other social and economic benefits. This helps the region sustainably meet resource needs, reduces fuels and moves the forest back to a more natural forest condition. Additionally, this also decreases demand for imported wood products.

We also need a bio-fuel facility to consume forest fuels and create clean electricity. Some envision a forest clean-up effort lasting 10 years, and then the job is done. The fact is, Mother Nature's robust production of forest fuels never stops, therefore neither can we. Does a gardener weed once and then never weed again?

California's forestry industry holds many of the important key components to a safer Tahoe Basin.

Unfortunately, California's capacity to harvest and process wood continues to decline. The pressure to protect all resources from any impacts has ignored the unintended consequences of today's devastating wildfires. This protection resulted in reduced harvest, creating mill closures and the loss of experienced wood workers.

In some parts of the state, there are no facilities to process wood. Four years ago in San Bernadino County, a fire in an overcrowded unmanaged forest devastated Lake Arrowhead - even worse than South Lake Tahoe. With no mills or biomass plants within 250 miles, the community couldn't feasibly manage forests to protect it from wildfire. Additionally, after the fire, with no mills or loggers, there was no viable economic system to harvest the millions of dead trees.

As last month's Southern California fire demonstrated, the need to remove fuel in those forests remains a great challenge.

But for Lake Tahoe, there still is enough infrastructure and labor to accomplish the task.

As a community, we must move quickly to improve the health of our forests and dramatically reduce the chance of another catastrophic wildfire. Mother Nature —in the form of the Angora Fire — cleared 3,100 acres this summer.

As North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District Division Chief Norb Szczurek told the California-Nevada Commission, there are three elements that contribute to a fire: weather, terrain and fuel.

"We can't do a thing about the weather or terrain, but we can control the fuel the fire has to use," Szczurek said.

And U.S. Sen. Harry Reid, the leader of Democrats in the U.S. Senate, remarked on a tour of the basin in August: "The number one issue facing the basin is fire. We have to do something to speed things up."

Working together, the public, regulatory agencies and forest industry can carefully manage our forests, reduce the chance of catastrophic wildfire and avoid a repeat of this unnecessary devastation.

Fuel reduction will occur by our proactive efforts or by Mother Nature, also known as Angora.

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