

Thinking Thinning

Unique machine takes on fuels-reduction project in Tahoe City

By Andrew Cristancho

Sierra Sun, acristancho@sierrasun.com

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While dry weather is not usually welcome in a fire-conscious community, a trio of local agencies is taking advantage of this fall's spotty precipitation to begin a fuel-reduction project in the forest above Tahoe City.

Thinning crews started work Thursday, and will continue for the next 10 days, weather permitting.

The Tahoe City Public Utility District, along with the North Tahoe Fire Protection District and the Nevada Fire Safe Council, will conduct forest thinning near the Highlands subdivision, removing small trees and brush that create dangerous fuel ladders in the event of a wildfire.

Andrew List, executive director of the Nevada Fire Safe Council, said the nonprofit is currently participating in 18 such projects around the Lake Tahoe Basin. He said interest has grown in thinning Tahoe's forest since the Angora Fire burned 3,100 acres and destroyed 364 homes this summer on the South Shore.

Part of the funding the Fire Safe Council will administer comes from funds received by the U.S. Forest Service, List said.

Tahoe City's utility district will pony up \$10,000 of the total project cost of \$45,000, said Assistant General Manager Cindy Gustafson. The 16 acres to be treated is part of 43 acres of district-owned property, she said. Crews will thin a 100-foot buffer between private properties and district land.

"The [public utility district] was very responsive and we are satisfied with the coming project," said Paul Vatisas, vice president of the Highlands Homeowners Association.

The project will cost \$600 per acre, according to North Tahoe Fire Protection District Chief Duane Whitelaw.

"The fire district is stepping up with 75 percent of the costs," he said.

Fire district money will come from a \$495,000 grant issued to North Tahoe Fire for fuel reduction work mandated by the Community Wildfire Protection Plan, according to Whitelaw.

John Pickett, coordinator of the Fire Safe Council California, said crews will use state-of-the-art equipment on the project — "a masticator mounted on an excavator," a machine that is part tractor and part chipper. He said the machine was specially designed for Lake Tahoe, taking into account the Basin's sensitive ecological environment.

"This is the lowest-impact system in the world," Pickett said. "We have a responsibility to protect people from fire; that doesn't mean we have to compromise the environment."

Finishing the project depends on the weather, Pickett said. In the face of the first significant snowfall, crews will halt work and resume the thinning project in the spring.

In the event of rain instead of snow, the districts would probably suspend operations for a day or so to allow the soils to dry out, since moisture makes soil more susceptible to compaction, he said.

The thinning project first was scheduled for next spring, but the Tahoe City utility was able to make it its top priority because of delays with other district projects.

"We are exceptionally pleased that we can begin the project this year," General Manager Bob Lourey said in a new release Tuesday.

Placer mandates defensible space

Placer County supervisors adopted a new ordinance Tuesday that will force landowners to clear their lots — or have it cleared for them.

The compulsory program requires property owners to create 100 feet of defensible space around housing and other structures, even if the perimeter extends into a neighbor's undeveloped lot, according to Placer Emergency Service Program Manager Rui Cunha.

The defensible space ordinance takes effect Feb. 1, and expires a year later on Jan. 31 2009.

The Hazardous Vegetation Abatement ordinance supplements an existing California law that requires homeowners to clear fire fuels from within 100 feet of their homes. That law stopped at the property line, while the new ordinance requires the owner of an unimproved lot to comply or be fined.

"You will be given a certain amount of time to clean it up," said Placer District 5 Supervisor Bruce Kranz on Thursday. "And if you refuse, we will take appropriate action and, though there is appeal process, if you continue to refuse throughout the process there will be some penalties. We will take appropriate action: We will clean it up and you will pay for it."

The ordinance requires a parcel owner to pay half the county's cost to remove hazardous vegetation and any administrative fees, if the owner does not complete the work on their own.

Ultimately, noncompliance could force the landowner to pay a fine of up to \$1,000 and possible jail time, according to a memorandum from the Placer County Office of Emergency Service.

— Andrew Cristancho, Sierra Sun

A masticator operated by CTL Forest Management shreds standing fuel at the Tahoe Cross Country Center Thursday. The Tahoe City Public Utility District, North Tahoe Fire Protection District and Nevada Fire Safe Council have contracted the one-of-a-kind machine to thin forest above Tahoe City. **Seth Lightcap/Sierra Sun**



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