



May 21, 2008

Agencies support Carson Range fire plan

By Jeff DeLong
jdelong@rgj.com

Nearly 100,000 homes along a swath of the eastern Sierra from Reno to Douglas County would receive added protection in a new plan to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires.

The strategy is designed to reach across jurisdictional boundaries and ensure the land most at risk for destructive fires is targeted first, and it is described as needed progress to protect a vulnerable place.

"We're trying to erase political boundaries because fire doesn't respect those boundaries," said Franklin Pemberton, spokesman for the U.S. Forest Service's Carson Ranger District. "It's the first time I know of that everyone has put their plans under one roof."

The plan is designed to comply with legislation passed by Congress in 2006 that frees up additional funding raised through the sale of federal land in Southern Nevada to fund forest thinning and similar steps to reduce fire danger.

It would concentrate on a 223,000-acre stretch of the Carson Range, including portions of Washoe and Douglas counties and Carson City -- all areas that have been hit by dangerous fires in the past and which remain vulnerable to more in the future, officials said.

Fifteen "partners" -- including state, federal and local governments, fire districts and the Washoe Tribe -- support a plan increasing the amount of land treated for fuel reduction by 210 percent, according to the recently released strategy.

Nearly 100,000 homes are in the affected region -- 60,000 of them outside urban core areas and deemed to be at significant risk of fire.

Estimated cost of implementing the strategy is between \$89 million and \$149 million.

Much of the work would occur along quarter-mile or wider "defense zones," where residential neighborhoods abut the forest and where homes are most vulnerable to fire.

Work within those zones would focus on thinning overgrown stands of forest and removing small-diameter trees, low-hanging limbs and continuous patches of brush and grass that can easily spread fire.

Other work would occur farther away from homes in so-called "threat zones." There, foresters would establish islands of treated land designed to slow the spread and intensity of a wildfire.

Areas where the highest danger has been identified would be treated first. In Washoe County, for example, 7,424 acres would receive treatment over the first five years and land deemed less of a threat during the subsequent five years.

"A planning effort like this was long overdue," said Andrew List, executive director of the Nevada Fire Safe Council.

By pursuing fuel control that crosses jurisdictional boundaries, List said, communities along the Sierra front should be able to cut costs, which improves their ability to compete for limited federal dollars.

"Collaboration can bring resources to bear that couldn't be brought to bear individually," Nevada State Forester Pete Anderson said. "We have a lot more strength in working together."

The planned forest treatment work can go a long way to protecting homes in the east Sierra from dangerous blazes like last summer's Hawken Fire near Reno, which threatened hundreds, and the Waterfall Fire in Carson City in 2004, which destroyed 17.

"I think it could make a huge difference," Anderson said. "It wouldn't be a piecemeal approach, but a landscape approach."
