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EDITORIAL: Fire prevention at Lake Tahoe

Emergency orders rightly prioritize public safety, property

Last summer's Angora Fire did much more than cause \$140 million in property damage, including the destruction of 254 South Lake Tahoe homes. It torched long-held suppositions about environmental protection, land-use restrictions and forest management, exposing unresponsive local, state and federal bureaucracies that put their regulatory authority ahead of fire prevention and public safety.

On Tuesday, Nevada Gov. Jim Gibbons and California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger took a step toward deterring another disastrous blaze, signing emergency declarations for the five counties surrounding Lake Tahoe to speed wildfire protections. The declarations were a core recommendation of a commission empaneled by the governors last year to examine the policy failures behind the Angora Fire.

Lake Tahoe area residents didn't need to read the commission's report to know the reason the fire caused so much ruin: the Draconian rule of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, which hits homeowners with steep fines for cutting down trees, clearing brush or removing dried pine needles from their property. Agency enforcers maintain such actions expose bare soil and encourage erosion, which can cloud Lake Tahoe.


About 1,200 angry residents shouted down the agency's executive director during a meeting last July when he tried to defend such policies, even as the Angora Fire was turning houses into piles of ash because of the abundance of wildfire fuel in residential areas.

The commission's report zeroed in on the planning agency and the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board for failing to recognize that wildfires cause significantly more damage to the lake's clarity than fire prevention measures. The report said both agencies needed to streamline the permitting process for tree clearing "with priority given to protection of life, property and the environment, in that order."

Overgrown forests in and around communities should be thinned within five years, and throughout the entire Tahoe basin within a decade, the commission said. Agencies with overlapping responsibilities were urged to halt their infighting and better coordinate fire prevention efforts.

Regardless of whether the governors' emergency declarations help the region achieve these goals, they're an important acknowledgement that government completely failed Lake Tahoe taxpayers last year. And it's extremely encouraging that the governors are now putting mankind's welfare and property rights ahead of other concerns.

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