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Schwarzenegger, Nevada's governor vow to lessen Tahoe fire dangers

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Tuesday declared a state of emergency in Placer and El Dorado counties, ahead of what may be a hazardous fire season.

The declaration came as Schwarzenegger and his Nevada counterpart, Gov. Jim Gibbons, approved a set of recommendations stemming from last year's Angora fire near South Lake Tahoe that include setting up better communication and cooperation among government agencies that prevent and fight fires in the region.

The emergency declaration – similar ones were issued in Nevada counties along Lake Tahoe – will help set up a mechanism to tap into federal funds for firefighting and rehabilitating burned land, said California Fire Marshal Kate Dargan, co-chair of the bi-state Lake Tahoe Commission.

"We will not rest until this natural crown jewel is as safe as it is beautiful," Schwarzenegger said during a ceremony in South Lake Tahoe.

The governors approved many of the fire prevention recommendations outlined in a final report by a commission established after the Angora fire, which scorched more than 3,000 acres and destroyed more than 250 homes nearly a year ago.

Among the recommendations: Streamline the process to obtain tree-cutting permits.

Schwarzenegger emphasized the need to build defensible spaces around homes and buildings, to make the Tahoe Basin safer and better-prepared for wildfires. He instructed the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection to provide the Tahoe basin extra firefighters, equipment and fire engines and safety inspectors.

But on Tuesday, as he introduced Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., Schwarzenegger said that 90 percent of the land around the lake is federal land.

Feinstein said the Senate last week approved an amendment to a 2008 supplemental appropriations bill that provides emergency funding, including \$450 million for firefighting efforts.

The federal money will back up a state budget revision this month that funds CalFire so it can step up home inspections and improve firefighting capabilities.

Schwarzenegger ordered CalFire to fine homeowners who do not maintain a 100-foot zone free of vegetation. Dargan said a \$500 fine would apply after three violations.

Craig Thomas, executive director of the Sierra Forest Legacy, said the focus of the recommendations was accurate – on "community fire protections." More than three-fourths of Tahoe homeowners do not comply with defensible space rules, he said.

A rebate program that helps homeowners cover half the cost of fireproofing their homes, up to \$1,000, took effect last week, said John Pickett of the Nevada Fire Safe Council.

The money, offered through fire districts around Tahoe, comes from the sale of surplus land near Las Vegas – a federal deal called the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act.

Pickett said more than 100 Tahoe homeowners have applied for funding.

California officials are working on rebates to help people create their defensible space. But on Tuesday the governors approved language that also would apply higher property taxes on those who don't take steps such as replacing wood shingles.

"It's been a flood of people trying to get this work done, and rightly so," Pickett said. "People are really concerned."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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