

Learning from Burning

Property owners, fire agencies learn from last summer's flames

BY BY [JENNY GOLDSMITH](#)

SIERRA SUN,

Creating defensible space has been the law around the Tahoe Basin for over a decade, but area residents and fire protection districts have picked up the pace this summer to protect their homes from future wildfires.

"I've never seen as many wood piles and as much cooperation as I have over the past few months. It's just incredible," said Ed Miller, information officer for the North Tahoe Fire Protection District.

As homeowners take on the responsibility to protect their property, fire districts are amplifying efforts to assist them, Miller said.

After residents passed a fire suppression assessment last fall supplying the North Tahoe fire district with roughly \$600,000 annually, the district has been able to hire a full-time defensible space inspector, more crews for curbside chipping, increased staff on red-flag warning days and the distribution of neighborhood-specific evacuation plans to residents, said Chief Duane Whitelaw.

Whitelaw said he attributes the unprecedented approach toward defensible space to the Angora and Washoe wildfires that blasted through neighborhoods and forests around the Basin last summer.

"Sometimes you have to go through times of disaster," Whitelaw said. "The lessons we learned from both those incidences, including the devastating fires across the state, were that we needed to do more for fire prevention."

Even as hazy skies blanket the region serving as a reminder of the Basin's imminent wildfire danger, not everyone understands or follows the guidelines to protect their property. Because of that fire districts are offering defensible space inspections to help property owners, Miller said.

An estimated 95 percent of North Tahoe fire district residents have been willing to comply with the recommendations provided by the inspection, but some problems with fuel reductions continue to occur, said defensible space inspector Jesse Shirley.

"The biggest frustration is educating the public on what a natural forest is," Shirley said. "Everyone has their idea of what their cabin in Tahoe should look like."

Some homeowners don't want to observe the 100 feet of space ordinance, so Shirley said he offers literature on the history of Tahoe's low-intensity fires that used to burn routinely and helped create an open, patchy forest.

Other reoccurring problems Shirley said he encounters during inspections include wood piles stacked against a structure and low-lying limbs that need removal.

"It takes hardly anything for an ember to land on a wood pile and burn the whole house down," Shirley said.

The North Tahoe Fire Protection District isn't the only fire agency working to help residents create defensible space.

The Truckee Fire Protection District and the Meeks Bay Fire Protection District have also hired full-time defensible-space inspectors, increased chipping crews and provided more public outreach and fuels reduction encouragement, said Gene Welch of Truckee Fire.



- Emma Garrard/Sierra Sun

"What we're looking for is for people to be able to protect their home with a garden hose," Welch said.

Tahoe Donner, Truckee's largest subdivision, has implemented a mandatory defensible space inspection program on a four-year rotation, with 1,500 inspections to take place this year.

"There's a lot going on with every fire district," Miller said. "Public Resource Code 4291 is not just a good idea, it is the law, and it is there for the benefit of the entire community."

<http://www.sierrasun.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080716/NEWS/211461146/0/&template=printart>

Copyright 2008 All Rights Reserved