

Forest-thinning project unveiled (w/slideshow)

BY [JEFF MUNSON](#),

Insiders call it the "halo effect." Others in forestry say it's common sense.

The idea behind the "halo" is to create safe zones around homes in the forests of the Lake Tahoe Basin.

Whether or not the halo effect will stand the guardian-angel test remains to be seen, but those who engineered it say they're confident that homes and lives would be saved in the event of a catastrophic forest fire.

A portion of the 93-acre forest-thinning project in the lower Kingsbury Grade area was unveiled publicly this weekend. Now completed, the joint project of the Nevada Fire Safe Council, Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District and the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team got off the ground June 1.

The idea behind the project was to undo some of the region's forest practices that have, over time, caused a tinderbox of potential destruction throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin, said Mark Novak of the Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District.

Nowhere was this more evident than in last year's Angora fire, which destroyed 254 homes, burned 3,072 acres and caused more than \$160 million in damage.

Armed with a new kind of forest practice that aims to reverse more than 100 years of dense brush and tree buildup, 70 acres were trimmed with machines and about 23 acres were treated by hand crews on land owned by the Douglas County School District, the Douglas County Sewer Improvement District and Sierra Pacific.

"It's exciting for us on all levels, because we're going back to doing what the forest should have had happen naturally," said John Pickett, operating manager for the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team. "And what you're beginning to see is life everywhere - in the forest, in all the places where we put in our technological footprints."

With the help of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, which monitored soil erosion at the site, the impacts on the forest floor are minimal. Germination of plant life is evident across the thinned forest floor. And in 10 years or so, it will be dense yet manageable enough to create a prescribed burn, emulating the kind of natural fires needed to keep a forest healthy.

"There is some soil erosion, a little less than a prescribed burn, but it is 70 times less than a catastrophic fire," said Doug Martin, district manager of the North Tahoe Conservation District.

Or, put another way, the old Smokey Bear ways of asking the public to prevent forest fires has evolved into something else.

While we should stop forest fires before they start, "we're in a post-Smokey Bear paradigm," said Mike Vollmer, a TRPA vegetation program manager. "We've been successful for 100 years in putting out the fires. We've also seen the result of this in the ecology we have today.

"Now, with projects like this, we're doing it the way the natural environment has intended it to be. We're doing it a



- Jonah M. Kessel / Tahoe Daily Tribune



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step at a time."

The next Fire Safe Council project is set to begin in a couple of weeks on the West Shore.



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