

Ensign, Feinstein promise to create bills, get funding

Amanda Fehd
August 22, 2005

TAHOE CITY - Sen. John Ensign said Tahoe will need \$200 million to restore its forests over the next 10 years at the Lake Tahoe Summit on Sunday, where the topic of the day was prevention of catastrophic wildfire in the Tahoe Basin.

"We all have a commitment to this and we need to keep our eye on the ball," Ensign said, adding that a serious fire would set back the basin 100 years and, because of erosion, erase all environmental progress made so far.

Ensign said he was working on a proposal with Sen. Diane Feinstein, D-Calif., to secure the necessary funding from various sources.

"Our staff over the next couple months will be looking at the Healthy Forests Initiative to figure out how we can do this," Ensign said. The senator is close to securing \$187.5 million for Tahoe through Southern Nevada land sales.

Sen. Harry Reid was not able to attend. He suffered a small stroke, it was revealed Friday.

Fire prevention work in Tahoe is speeding up, according to Mike Vollmer, executive director of the Nevada Fire Safe Council, which organizes neighborhoods for fire prevention work. The council serves both the California and Nevada sides of the basin.

"The amount of work accomplished in the last year is more than any other year," Vollmer said. "Things are happening at the speed of light compared to how things go here."

All five California and two Nevada Tahoe-area fire protection districts have completed Community Wildfire Protection Plans in the last year, identifying 26,000 acres of federal and private land that is most at risk of wildfire. They are now working on a comprehensive fire protection plan, to be completed by next March.

The Forest Service estimates 42,000 acres of its land need thinning, yet a lack of money enabled it to thin only about 15,000 acres the last five years, Feinstein said. She and the other senators have several funding ideas that could be incorporated into their proposed legislation.

During previous reporting on this topic, Rex Norman, spokesperson for the Forest Service in Lake Tahoe, has said 55,000 acres have been identified as needing fire prevention work and to date, more than 36,000

U.S. Sens. John Ensign and Dianne Feinstein, and Steve Johnson, administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, respond to reporters' questions at Tahoe City's Commons Beach on Sunday. / Tribune News Service



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acres have been treated to remove excess flammable material, called fuels.

The Forest Service holds 80 percent of land in the Lake Tahoe Basin, totaling 160,000 acres.

Collaboration is key

Vollmer pointed out its not easy to coordinate the goals of two states, four counties, and seven fire protection districts which have stakes in the basin.

Feinstein lauded the collaborative efforts that have brought fire prevention to the fore.

"It's the end of friction, the beginning of doing. Practicality has set in," she told the Tribune after the Summit.

She credited bipartisan efforts for the environmental successes at the basin.

"This wasn't true before 1997," she said.

President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore attended the first summit in 1997, which started a program to spend \$900 million for 700 environmental improvement projects throughout the basin.

It will most likely take more than \$900 million to complete the projects, according to Julie Regan, spokeswoman for the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. Current costs estimates are twice that much.

Many projects are focused on lake clarity and include requirements for homeowners to institute Best Management Practices, which came under scrutiny at the summit.

"I think we have to be willing to look beyond what we've done in the past and find alternatives acceptable to communities as a whole," said Harold Singer, executive officer of Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board. He said BMPs only work when maintained, while a stormwater treatment facility could address pollution at its source.

A Shot in the arm

The summit brings together Tahoe's leaders each year to evaluate successes and focus on future needs for environmental protection.

"The real value of these (summits) is to reinvigorate and hold their feet to the fire," said Michael Donahoe, conservation co-chair for the Tahoe area Sierra Club.

"People are accentuating the positive, but there are some serious differences that exist. We have to start doing what's best for the lake."

Vollmer agreed there is an intrinsic value to the yearly gathering.

"You can lose momentum when you don't have the money, this is a shot in the arm for the momentum building over the last two years," said Vollmer.

- The Associated Press contributed to this report.