

Show us the money

Amanda Fehd
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Many agencies and communities in the basin have been looking forward to the day the federal Healthy Forests Restoration Act will deliver greenbacks to Tahoe for fire prevention.

Dan Thrift / Tahoe Daily Tribune / The Healthy Forest Restoration Act could fund projects such as this prescribed burn near Spooner Summit.



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So far, the two-year-old act has not been funded.

But many are hoping for some news at this Sunday's Lake Tahoe Summit in Tahoe City, where fire will be one of the main issues discussed.

The risk of catastrophic fire is the No. 1 concern of basin residents, according to the U.S. Forest Service and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency surveys.

Forests are thick and unhealthy because of fire suppression. Fire was once an essential part of the ecosystem. But a fire left uncontrolled today would likely do nothing but destroy the ecosystem, and possibly its surrounding human development.

While there's cause for great concern, the common perception that the whole basin could go up in flames at once is incorrect, said Rex Norman, spokesperson for the Forest Service in Tahoe.

"We are not a Southern California waiting to happen," said Norman.

But most of the communities in the basin are listed on the Federal Register for Communities-at-Risk, according to the Lake Tahoe Environmental Education Coalition at lteec.org. And even a small fire in the Lake Tahoe Basin could be catastrophic and devastate life and property, experts say.

Starting small

Communities are taking matters into their own hands, forming chapters of the Nevada Fire Safe Council, which also serves California in the basin. More than \$100,000 in grant money has been secured for neighbors to work together to decrease the overall threat of fire to their communities.

Fire departments have staff available to perform defensible space inspections, and to recommend what measures a homeowner should take, such as clearing trees, shrubs or branches, to make their home more defensible to fire.

Fire Safe Council Chapters vary in size from 400 plus homes to 20, said Jennifer Arrowsmith, the council's basin coordinator. Just recently, David Kelly contacted her to start a chapter in the south Apache area of Meyers.

"If he succeeds, it will be one of the first chapters in the California side of Tahoe basin," said Arrowsmith.

The Forest Service helped local fire districts last year come up with their community plans in order to get federal dollars.

"In March 2004, the fire districts and the Forest Service began designing community wildfire plans," Norman said. "We've completed that process and now TRPA is moving those plans into a single, basinwide plan, with the intent to help make our communities competitive for funding from the Healthy Forest Restoration Act."

The Forest Service spends \$2.5 million on average each year on fire prevention projects, said Norman. And they could always use more funds for that purpose.

"We've long recognized that there's a need here for additional project work," Norman said.

[BACK](#) 