

Tree removal one step easier

Amanda Fehd  
August 26, 2005

One more step was eliminated in the bureaucratic process to protect South Shore homes from fire Thursday.

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency signed its first agreement Thursday with a fire district in California to eliminate one of two permits required to remove trees which are considered a fire hazard on private property.

Homeowners may now make a direct request to the Lake Valley Fire Protection District, which covers 80 square miles of unincorporated area in El Dorado County in the Lake Tahoe Basin, to identify trees which pose a fire risk and issue a permit.

Formerly, homeowners had to request a permit from both the TRPA and the fire district. Four other fire districts are working on their agreements with the TRPA: South Lake Tahoe, Fallen Leaf, Meeks Bay, and North Tahoe.

A \$50 permit from the district covers all trees that will be removed. Trees less than 6 inches in diameter, measured 41¼ inches off the ground, do not require a permit to remove.

Neighborhood responsibility

---

Jim Grant / Tahoe Daily Tribune/ Beth Brady, a fire prevention officer with the Forest Service, hands defensible space evaluation forms to Echo Lakes cabin owners.



[Click to Enlarge](#)

---



[Click to Enlarge](#)

Jim Grant / Tahoe Daily Tribune/ Dan Moses cuts down a small white fir near a cabin on Echo Summit because if it caught fire, it could create a fuel ladder by lighting a larger, neighboring tree on fire. The tree is smaller than 6 inches diameter at a height of 41½ feet.

No permit needed

Much defensible space work can be done without a permit, said John Pickett, president of the Sugar Pine Foundation, which is dedicated to finding sugar and white pines with a genetic resistance to blister rust.

A group of cabin owners on Echo Summit gathered on a recent Sunday with Pickett's forestry knowledge to mark trees less than 6 inches in diameter for removal and get rid of dead material in the forest around them.

"It was a community effort," Pickett said. "If your neighbor doesn't participate in the thinning, then the fire would intensify on your neighbor's yard and be able to sweep through your yard."

Homeowners should have the confidence that they can do a lot of this work themselves, he said.

Forests are unhealthy in Tahoe because smaller trees, which historically would have been eliminated by fire, are starving their larger neighbors of water, Pickett said. Smaller trees have as much live bark as larger trees and can use as much water.

While managers of public lands have stepped up fire prevention efforts, fire departments and the Nevada Fire Safe Council are trying to get the word out to private property owners that they too have a responsibility to reduce the threat of a fire spreading through their neighborhood.

"You are only as safe as your neighbor, whoever that neighbor is," said Mike Vollmer, executive director of the fire council, which serves all of the Lake Tahoe Basin, including the California side.

The defensible space concept involves identifying and removing small or unhealthy trees, cutting branches dropping below 6 feet off the ground, and removing juniper and other highly flammable plants from around the house. Shake roofs and flammable siding are also concerns.

It's not just easier now, it's the law. Creating 100 feet of defensible space is required by California code, said Jennifer Arrowsmith, basin coordinator for the fire safe council. Insurance companies are also scrutinizing homes more closely for defensible space measures.

Lake Valley provides a free chipping program to all El Dorado County residents in the basin. Homeowners should lay out their cut up trees and slash and call 577-CHIP to arrange a chipper visit. Milled wood or wood with nails is not OK.

Eliminating smaller trees helps neighboring trees become more healthy and grow to be beautiful and majestic, Pickett said.

It also takes out a step in the "fire ladder".

Defensible space is all about disrupting the ladder, in which bushes or branches enable a fire to climb from a pile of debris on the forest floor to the crowns of the trees.

"We want to remove our ladder fuels," said Martin Goldberg of Lake Valley. "We want to get rid of small trees and branches of trees that drop down below 6 feet and the brush that leads up to those trees. That's how a ground fire becomes a crown fire and you don't want that, because crown fires spread very fast."

Fire hazards: Myths and facts

Pine needles: Are they a fire hazard or not?

Fresh pine needles are flammable, said Martin Goldberg at Lake Valley Fire Protection District. You especially don't want them on your deck, under your eaves or on your roof. The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and fire districts have a consensus now to recommend removing pine needles within 5 feet of your house.

However, pine needles which have decomposed a bit in the yard are great for protecting Tahoe's soil from erosion. Leave those be. A one to three-inch layer is ideal.

Small trees: Will there be a forest tomorrow if we remove them today? Yes, says John Pickett, founder of the Sugar Pine Foundation. Trees in the Sierra Nevada evolved around fire, which cleared sunny spaces for them to grow. If a small tree grows under a bigger one, it will rob its larger neighbor of water it needs to grow healthy. Healthy trees mean more seeds, and more trees for tomorrow.

Is TRPA a roadblock? No, said Jennifer Arrowsmith, basin coordinator for the Nevada Fire Safe Council. TRPA supports creating defensible space and has made fire prevention its No. 1 priority.

Does defensible space involve clear cutting or getting rid of all vegetation within 30 feet of my home? No, said Arrowsmith. People love living in Tahoe because there are so many trees. But it's ideal to create space between trees. People are often happier with their yards after they've created defensible space, Arrowsmith said.