Wildfire: A Threat to Lake Tahoe Forests

The wildfire threat at Lake Tahoe was not always as high as it is today. Historically, frequent small fires maintained forest health by removing brush, small trees, and dead wood. These fires also created a patchwork of lightly wooded areas interspersed throughout more heavily wooded areas. This patchwork prevented fires that ignited from becoming large and destructive. Fire helped to create fire-resilient and drought-tolerant forests.

Nowadays forest fires at Lake Tahoe are extinguished as quickly as possible to protect human life and property. Over time, this has created vast unbroken expanses of heavily wooded areas that would fuel large, destructive fires. Recent studies have concluded that a forest fire ignition near any one of many populated areas around Lake Tahoe has a strong chance of becoming a large, destructive wildfire with devastating effects on the ecosystem, recreation, infrastructure, housing stock and local economy.

Heavily wooded and lightly wooded areas look different, and respond differently to fire, as described below.

1 Year after fire: heavily wooded area
- Burned areas noticeable for many years
- Most vegetation and trees are killed
- Erosion is more likely
- Erosion reduces Lake water clarity
- Habitat for wildlife is lost

1 Year after fire: lightly wooded area
- Burned areas less noticeable after a year
- Most large trees survive
- Erosion is less likely
- Lake water clarity not affected
- Habitat for wildlife remains

Steps to control fire risk in Lake Tahoe area forests

The Lake Tahoe area contains 191,000 acres of forest with heavily wooded areas and lightly wooded areas. Currently, the proportion of heavily forested area is much too high. Forest managers can perform forest treatments to create lightly wooded areas that will break up large, unbroken heavily wooded areas. This patchwork reduces the risk that ignitions will result in large and destructive fires.

At this time, there is insufficient funding to recreate and maintain lightly wooded forest.

- Decisions must be made about wildfire forest treatments in Lake Tahoe area forests
- A decision to do nothing allows the risk of a large, destructive wildfire to continue to grow

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