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4. **WILDFIRES: Forest Service says thinning limited Tahoe-area fire** (08/09/2007)

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

The U.S. Forest Service reports that the devastating Angora wildfire, which destroyed over 250 homes in the South Lake Tahoe area this summer, could have been far worse if not for past fuel treatment efforts. The report released Aug. 3 looked into how the 3,072-acre fire spread in areas where fuel treatment programs had been conducted on Forest Service lands before the fire.

These programs included mechanical thinning, followed by hand thinning and burning piles of wood and brush. The objective is to reduce the intensity of a wildfire from a crown fire to that of a surface fire. This lessens the likelihood of spread and allows firefighters to get closer to a blaze as they try to contain the area affected.

Kathy Murphy, a fuels operations officer for the agency in California and co-author of the report, told *Land Letter*, "We found, for the most part, that fuels treatment was effective in bringing a crown fire down to a surface fire."

She noted that the Angora fire occurred "under some of the most severe fire danger conditions in this area in the past 20 years," including extremely dry conditions and high winds.

The study looked in particular at 480 acres of land where thinning had been conducted, finding that about 405 acres burned with surface fire intensity, while just 75 acres burned as a crown fire. According to the report, the difference was significant and dramatic. "The fire entered the treatment area as a crown fire and immediately transitioned to a surface fire as a result of the thinning of small trees that would otherwise carry fire up to the crowns," the report found. When the fire moved into the residential area as a surface fire, however, it increased in intensity due to the increased flammability of structures and combustible items near the houses.

Similarly, in another unit, "the full force of the crowning headfire ran into this treatment unit, torching trees along the southern edge," the report stated. "After penetrating the treated area, the crown fire lost momentum and transitioned into a lower intensity surface fire due to greatly reduced amount of surface fuel, limited ladder fuels and wider crown spacing."

There were also positive findings for about 300 urban lots owned by the Forest Service that had previously been inspected to see whether residents were maintaining a defensible perimeter around their homes. According to Murphy, about 80 percent of these lots were subject to surface intensity fires, while the fires consumed 95-100 percent of tree crowns and surface vegetation on untreated lands.

The report concluded that while treated areas near residential subdivisions were a kind of "safety zone" that saved houses and prevented the fire from spreading, a large number of the houses that were destroyed caught



In the aftermath of the Angora wildfire, homes in a Lake Tahoe neighborhood are paying more attention to fire safety and clearing a defensible space. Photo by Arthur O'Donnell

fire from another building, not from wildland fuels.

Also, areas that had been commercially logged in the 1990s to remove trees killed by a bark-beetle infestation were prone to high-intensity fire that burned through logging debris and other fuel. These areas burned as intensely as fires on property that had not been treated at all.

Total damages from the fire have been estimated as more than \$160 million.

"What we really need is a combination of fuels treatment and maintaining defensible space," Murphy said. "Thinning in combination with treatment of fuels has been effective. It's a validation that fuels treatment works as it was designed."

Murphy will soon be sharing the study's results with members of a joint state commission recently created by the governors of California and Nevada. The report was welcomed by the Tahoe Regional Planning Authority's governing board Chairwoman Julie Motamendi for its view of the "big picture" forest management, vegetation policies, construction materials and public education.

Idaho, Montana burning

The 2007 fire season continued at a high level of activity so far this month, with more than three-dozen fires larger than 500 acres reported through the West. While most of the nation's largest fires of the summer have been brought under control, firefighting resources are spread especially thin in Montana and Idaho.

Each state reports about 18 significant fires or complexes currently. Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer (D) this week declared a state of emergency and toured the site of the Jocko Lakes fire. Though relatively small in size at 15,000 acres, the blaze is considered one of the top priorities because it is threatening over 1,500 homes and 100 business properties and by this morning was 10 percent contained.



Flames torch crown tops at the North Zone Fire in Idaho, one of several blazes that make up the East Zone complex fire. Photo by Joe Reyes/USFS. Courtesy of inciweb.org.

Other Montana fires include the fast-growing 50,000-acre Chippy Creek fire on state lands, the 44,000-acre Ahorn fire in the Lewis & Clark National Forest and the 40,000-acre Meriwether fire. Firefighters are digging in for a long haul at the 31,000-acre Fools Creek fire that is burning in both the Flathead National Forest and the Lewis & Clark National Forest. Managers do not expect this blaze to be brought under control until late October.

Idaho officials also expect that some of its major blazes could burn for months because of steep terrain and fuels availability. The Rattlesnake fire reached 49,500 acres by midweek, with zero containment.

This is one of two fires that are currently burning on both sides of the Main Salmon River along a 35-mile stretch. As a result of smoke and fire hazards, public access to the river at Corn Creek has been closed. "The fire has been burning for two weeks," he noted.

California crews continue to battle the long-running Zaca fire in Santa Barbara County along the edges of the Los Padres National Forest. Val Rose of the CalFire state agency reported that the 72,000-acre blaze is now about 72 percent contained. "The fire is moving really slowly now," he said. Shifting winds are moving the blaze away from residences and toward wilderness areas. "There are still structures threatened but things are looking good now," Rose said.

The Zaca fire began July 4 in difficult terrain. Over 2,370 personnel have been fighting the blaze, which also required four air tankers and 15 helicopters. Current damage estimates exceed \$55 million.