



## Success Stories from the Western Region

### The North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District Takes on Prescribed Burning

North Lake Tahoe is stunning; the mixed conifer forest provides a rich backdrop for the deep blue lake and expensive homes that dot the shoreline in the Incline Village and Crystal Bay communities. In the fall, you can watch storms approach from the south side of the lake and observe the occasional squall break out over the water. Given home prices in the area and wildfire risk, the stakes are high, but the local fire protection district is working hard to mitigate that risk. Since the mid 1990's the North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District's Fuels Management Division has been working to improve the community's odds by reducing fuel in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI). Now when you're out storm watching in the fall, it is not uncommon see the Fuels Management Division conducting a prescribed burn. It is all part of their strategy to treat hazardous fuels using multiple methods including controlled understory burning to reduce fuel and promote forest regeneration.

**(At right) Members of the Northern California Prescribed Fire Council gather near one of the piles being burned as part of a Fuels Management Division controlled burn.** *Photo: Michelle Medley-Daniel, The Watershed Research and Training Center*



The area the district works in has been listed as an "extreme hazard" in the Code of Federal Registrars due to the high fuel loading. In order to meet their vegetation management goals, the Division has designed controlled burn prescriptions that allow them to achieve the fire effects they want, while maintaining control of the burns. When they first started burning in 1995, they completed just 10 acres. While this is a small number, they knew that they needed to start small and educate the community about the approach they were taking before they could scale up their projects and their impacts. Now, the Division endeavors to burn 100 acres a year. To date, they have burned over 800 acres in the Tahoe Basin WUI, many of which are situated adjacent to high-end homes.



**(At left) These homes are adjacent to a prescribed burn unit that the North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District's Fuels Management Division burned in order to reduce hazardous fuel.** *Photo: Michelle Medley-Daniel, The Watershed Research and Training Center*

In addition to prescribed burning, the Fuels Management Division also runs hand crews that reduce fuel in areas unsuitable for prescribed fire, and in advance of controlled burning operations. The Division hired its first hand crew in 1999 to conduct all aspects of fuels management activities. The crew also functions as an initial and extended-attack fire suppression crew. Led by Division Chief Norb Szczurek, the Fuels Management Division is a unique program and model for other fire protection districts in fire-prone areas.

The Division has had to overcome some inherent challenges in their work; one example is managing smoke. Given the topography of the Tahoe Basin, smoke can be a major challenge, so the Division works with their many partners and neighboring agencies to “share the air space” by coordinating projects during burn windows, thereby lessening impacts to residents. They also maintain an extensive list of the area’s smoke-sensitive citizens and notify them of planned burning operations. Their keen awareness of the community’s concerns about smoke is indicative of their whole approach to prescribed burning. They have invested in enrolling the community in their vision through their website; media coverage; block parties; and a traveling display, all in an effort to make residents aware of their work. Underlying their strategies is the belief that it is far better to remove hazardous fuels before the fire starts. By creating conditions that the District and community can better control, they are taking a proactive approach to wildfire management.

Division Chief Norb Szczurek offered the following advice to others working to develop a fuels management division, or similar program, “Make prescribed fire a key mission of your organization, build depth in prescribed fire positions, mentor from day one, build interagency prescribed fire teams, host a party, and invite others.”

**The signage below credits all of the partners who worked on a prescribed burn in the Incline Village area.** *Photo: Michelle Medley-Daniel, The Watershed Research and Training Center*



For more information contact Norb Szczurek, Division Chief, (775) 831-0351, or visit: <http://www.nltfpd.net/fuelreduction.aspx>

