

■ Introduction

Local fire departments, in cooperation with state and federal forestry agencies have developed the Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP). The CWPP describes how the wildfire threat can be reduced for Tahoe’s communities. An important part of Tahoe’s wildfire threat reduction plan is the intentional use of fire.

There is a large accumulation of vegetation or “fuel” present in many areas of Tahoe’s forests. This fuel is capable of supporting high intensity, uncontrollable wildfires. Frequent, low intensity fires can effectively and safely reduce fuel amounts. The result will be a substantial reduction in the wildfire threat to human life, property, and Lake Tahoe’s water quality.

The underlying goal is to manage the forest in a manner consistent with restoring it to pre-1870 conditions. While full restoration may take hundreds of years to accomplish, the steps taken in that direction will provide the benefits of improved forest health and wildfire hazard reduction in the near future.

■ Setting The Stage

Since fire has been absent for so long, there has been a considerable buildup of fuels. Under these conditions, prescribed burning cannot be safely performed. Work crews and homeowners can remove dead trees, thin live trees, and remove brush. This work creates the conditions necessary to safely reintroduce fire. Typically, there are two types of prescribed burning: understory and pile.

■ How Understory Burning is Done

The prescribed fire project is a well-planned, carefully orchestrated program involving the disciplines of fire ecology, fire suppression, forestry, and public safety. The important parts of the program are described below.

Training: Personnel have received extensive training and have been certified in prescribed burning.

Preburn Activities: Each winter a multidisciplinary team develops the “Burn Plan” for the upcoming fall burn season. During the summer months work crews start preparing the burn sites by creating firebreaks, clearing around high value trees, thinning dense pockets of brush, etc.

Burn Day: Unfortunately, the specific date of a proposed burn cannot be determined very far in advance. A “Go/No-Go Checklist” is used to decide if an understory burn can be safely and effectively conducted. If the necessary conditions are not optimal, the burn will be postponed until conditions “come into prescription.”The illustration presented at the upper right portrays a typical understory burn.

Tending the Burn: Burns are attended to minimize smoke production and maximize fuel consumption. Personnel closely monitor the site until the burn project is completed.

■ How Pile Burning is Done

Forestry work crews create burn piles when working in forested areas that do not allow efficient removal of the cut limbs and other tree and brush debris generated by these activities. This cut material, or slash, can serve as a fire hazard and a breeding ground for insect pest species. Consequently, it is important that this material be disposed of in a manner that does not cause harm to the forest or excessive cost and effort. When no roads or access ways are available, this material is usually burned on site. Burning slash is the most cost effective and efficient means for disposal of this hazardous material.

Pile Burning: When work crews thin a forest stand, they will stack the material into piles approximately 6 feet wide and 4 feet tall. These piles will be located away from other flammable material and will be spaced so as to create defensible zones between piles. In some areas there may be numerous piles. These piles are then left for several months to allow for sufficient drying of the material. When safe conditions exist, usually late fall through early spring, the



piles will be ignited and burned in place. Areas where piles have been burned will appear charred and will include partially burned wood chunks.

Pile Burning Safety: Burning activities are conducted by experienced crews. Areas around the piles are cleared of ground fuels to prevent fire from spreading into the wildland. Training, preburn activities, burn day procedures and tending the burn are all held to the same high standards as listed above for understory burning.

■ What Can a Homeowner Expect?

Although there are important benefits from burning, there may be some undesirable side effects. These include:

Smoke: Personnel go to great lengths to ensure that prescribed fire smoke will not significantly inconvenience homeowners or contribute to respiratory problems. Smoke, however, is a natural product of fire and some amounts are unavoidable.



Smell: A “campfire smell” will be present in your neighborhood for several days after the burn.



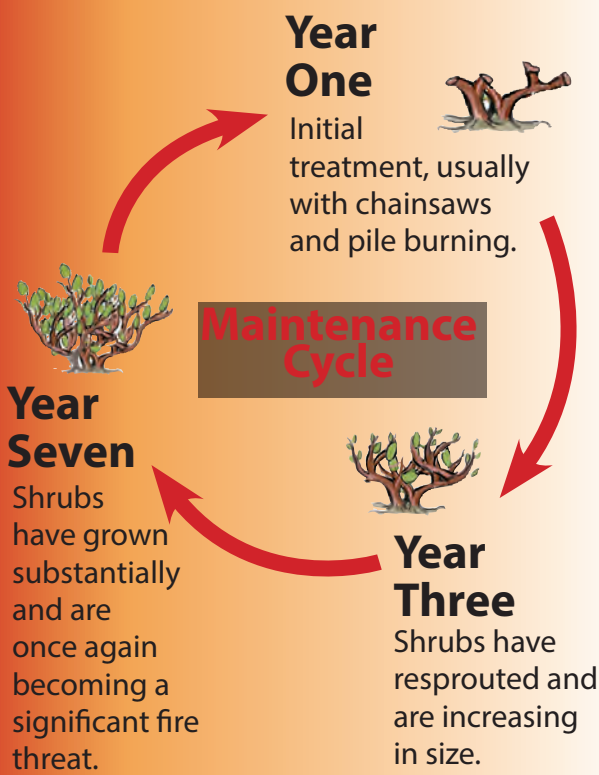
Scorching: Some scorching of lower tree branches is to be expected. After the fire, some needles will turn orange and eventually drop from the tree.



Barren Look: On understory burns, the treated site may appear charred and lifeless. This is a temporary condition. The following spring many shrubs will resprout and wildflowers may appear.

Fuel Management... An Ongoing Process

Many Tahoe Basin plants, such as greenleaf manzanita, huckleberry oak, and snowbrush, resprout after being cut or burned. Within a few years, areas may have to be treated again in order to reduce the wildfire hazard. Managing wildfire fuels is an ongoing process.



University of Nevada Cooperative Extension is an EEO/AA institution.
Copyright © 2007

Please note: If you have special medical conditions that could be affected by prescribed fire smoke, PLEASE contact your local fire protection district (see below).

For More Information:

For the Incline Village and Crystal Bay Area, contact the North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District by calling (775) 831-0351 or by going to www.nltfpd.net

For the Placer County portion of the Tahoe Basin, contact the North Tahoe Fire Protection District by calling (530) 583-6913 or by going to: www.ntfire.net

For detailed information concerning what homeowners can do to reduce the wildfire threat to their homes, go to:
www.livingwithfire.info

This brochure was produced in collaboration with the following entities:



University of Nevada Cooperative Extension

Bringing Fire Back to the Forest

Fire is Natural to Tahoe’s Environment

Fire has been a natural part of Tahoe’s environment for thousands of years. These fires were frequent, of low intensity, and a major influence on the appearance of Tahoe’s forests. Beginning in the 1870’s, Tahoe’s forests and the occurrence of fire experienced some dramatic changes.



Low intensity fire.



High intensity fire.



Original Forest

Prior to 1870, low intensity fires burned routinely in the Tahoe Basin. These fires created an open, patchy forest dominated by large trees. The raging, high intensity wildfires portrayed in today’s newspaper headlines were uncommon.



Logging Era

During the 1870’s to 1890’s, much of the Tahoe Basin was logged. E.B. Scott in The Saga of Lake Tahoe states “By the fall of 1897 nothing remained at Incline but stripped forest land.”



The New Forest

A new forest establishes in the aftermath of the logging era. But now fire has been effectively eliminated as a natural influence. Without frequent, low intensity fires to thin dense stands of trees, the forest becomes overcrowded.

1870

19

Emerald Bay - 1890’s

Emerald Bay - 1990’s