

California-Nevada Tahoe Basin Fire Commission

Key Recommendations

The California-Nevada Tahoe Basin Fire Commission's report includes 48 findings and 90 recommendations. They are organized into six categories that address both, short- and long-term needs, policy changes, education, funding, governmental structures, and environmental practices related to Lake Tahoe's vulnerability to wildfire.

The Commission's challenge from the Governors was to take a treasured jewel, two states, a diverse community, strongly held beliefs, the work of many regulatory agencies, and the input of a concerned public to create a set of recommendations to reduce the risk of wildfire to Lake Tahoe. The Commission's report recommends some change from past practices.

Environmental Protection

The difference between the threat of catastrophic fire to the Lake Tahoe Basin and the threat of catastrophic fire to other areas of California and Nevada is the presence of Lake Tahoe itself. Lake Tahoe is a unique national treasure and one of the few areas in America that warranted creation by two neighboring states and Congress of a planning authority to oversee its protection.

For more than thirty years, environmental matters within the Lake Tahoe Basin have been determined by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA), the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board (LAWQCB) and a myriad of federal and state agencies. This unique system of regulatory oversight has resulted in the imposition of multiple layers of requirements that are not found in other areas of the two states.

The Commission worked to reconcile important protections of the Basin's unique natural resources with commonly accepted fire prevention and suppression practices. In order to find a balance that reflected the values of life, property and environmental protection the Commission's recommendations address the need for:

- All agencies to make restoration of the Basin's forests to a more natural and fire-resistant condition as a common and primary goal (R 2)
- Easier implementation of fuels reduction project streamlining permitting procedures and monitoring requirements (R 17, 72)
- TRPA and the LRWQCB to review their procedures and requirements and, where possible without jeopardizing reasonable environmental practices to modify their requirements, to facilitate needed fuels reduction programs (R 16, 17, 18, 19, 35, 52, 53, 69, 73)

Issues of Governance

The Commission adopted a number of recommendations aimed at making the TRPA more responsive to concerns regarding the threat posed by catastrophic fire to residents of the Basin as well as to the Lake. Also included are recommendations addressing other agencies' practices and activities relating to the need to facilitate fuels removal projects in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

Recommendations are forwarded regarding the need to:

- Bring fire prevention perspectives to the TRPA (F 9; R 20) and have TRPA review its present requirements in light of their impacts on the risk of catastrophic fire (R 18, 19)
- Impose enhanced reporting obligations of the TRPA to the States of California and Nevada regarding such matters (R 21, 22, 23)
- Develop a Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) between TRPA and the LRWQCB to facilitate procedures relating to fuels reduction projects (F 11, 12; R 26)
- Make environmental standards relating to fuel removal projects uniform throughout the Basin (R17)
- Support the Tahoe Basin Fire Chief's "Nine Point Letter" to TRPA (F 8) and the agreements reached to resolve those concerns (R 19)
- Extend the Commission authority so that it may monitor implementation of the recommendations that are accepted by the Governors (F 6; R 14, 22)

Community and Homeowner Fire Prevention

A number of the Commission's recommendations recognize that fire prevention is also a duty of every property owner and must be aggressively addressed by private property owners within the Basin. Recommendations are therefore presented to:

- Clarify regulatory requirements relating the removal of pine needles from areas adjacent to residences (R 37)
- Require the implementation of defensible space around all structures (R 37,44)
- Address the need to retrofit all existing structures in the Basin with ignition resistant materials (R 45, 46)
- Promote educational programs regarding defensible space and fire safe practices (R 38, 39, 41)
- Implement the "Lake Tahoe Basin Multi-Jurisdictional Fuel Reduction and Wildfire Prevention Strategy - 10 Year Plan" that builds upon community wildfire prevention plans affecting every community within the Basin (R15, 54, 55)

Forest and Fuels Management

The key to addressing the buildup of fuels within the forests of the Basin is to remove the excess fuels as quickly as possible and to then maintain the forests according to sound forest management practices. The Commission developed a number of recommendations addressing this over-arching problem including:

- Implementation of the "Lake Tahoe Basin Multi-Jurisdictional Fuel Reduction and Wildfire Prevention Strategy – 10 Year Plan" with regard to the Basin's forests (R 15)
- The need to facilitate the use of hand-thinning and low-impact equipment and allow pile burning in sensitive stream environment zones and on steep slopes (R 17, 68, 70)
- The need to allow use of readily available mechanized equipment in such areas in order to accomplish fuels reduction projects (F 32; R 17, 68)
- The need to facilitate forest thinning practices and biomass processing as means to reduce the intensity of future wildfires and resulting pollution to air and water resources (F 21, R 56)
- The need to quickly clean up and reforest areas burned by the Angora Fire (F 19; R 50)

Fire Suppression

With respect to all matters within the Tahoe Basin, the Commission determined that protection of life, property, and the environment be served in that order of priority (R 78, 89). In that regard, the Commission has recommended a number of actions to:

- Enhance fire suppression resources within the Basin including revision of the “Balance of Acres” agreement between the State of California and federal authorities to assure that the Basin receives 24/7 fire protection services at a level equal to other state responsibility areas in California (F 37; R10, 75)
- Re-introduce CAL FIRE’s presence within the Basin (R 76)
- Equip the C-130’s of the Nevada Air National Guard with modular airborne fire fighting systems (R 78)
- Make fuels reduction projects in areas within and adjacent to the Basin’s communities the first priority by all agencies (R 69, 89)

Funding

Present funding levels for fire prevention, planning, and suppression activities in the Basin were found to be inadequate and in some cases, derived from sources that are not consistently reliable. The Commission also recognized the need for private property owners to participate in the costs of avoiding catastrophic wildfire. Consequently, the Commission has attempted to quantify immediate funding needs as well as funding needed on a long term basis needed from all stakeholders. To assist in identifying these needs and serve as a foundation for future discussions, the Commission adopted recommendations:

- Addressing the need to stabilize revenues from existing funding sources and to develop additional funding sources necessary for the implementation of the Multi-Jurisdictional Fuel Reduction and Wildfire Prevention Strategy 10 Year Plan (R 84, 87, 88)
- Encouraging the Governors to join with the States’ Congressional delegations to develop permanent federal sources of funding for emergency fuels reduction programs and forest restoration efforts in the Lake Tahoe Basin (R 82, 83)