

Tahoe's Perfect Storm



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Inertia has set the stage for catastrophic loss at Lake Tahoe.

How else to explain it? Everyone wants to keep the lake clear, yet dense forests choked with massive fuel loads surround the lake – even though most people realize that if fire strikes, the rains and snow that follow will wash thousands of cubic yards of debris into the lake.

Foresters certainly saw this coming. Forestry 101 says you can't just suppress fire with no other forest management and expect the forest to stay safe and healthy.

Water quality reigns supreme at Tahoe, and if students can understand that healthy forests promote water quality and burning forests degrade it, the experts must, too.

Ironically, our zealous passion for keeping sediments from reaching the lake has played a major role in producing the biggest threat to the lake's clarity in more than a century. Some organizations, in an attempt to prevent human activities from causing even tiny deposits to reach the lake, have repeatedly blocked proactive forest management. The likely unintended consequence of those actions may be that tons of mud hit the lake after catastrophic wildfire.

Erosion is a natural process. Water moves across the earth's surface and takes some soil with it. There are many human activities that can increase erosion, and forest thinning is frequently targeted as a potential source of erosion. It's true, forest thinning can increase sediment delivery to nearby watercourses, but in amounts virtually undetectable and for a brief period of time.

Just calculate the long-term percentage increase in sediment delivery a mudslide 100 yards long, 20 yards wide and 10 yards deep causes.

Moreover, forest thinning near water is off-limits, making stream environment zones among the most consistently overgrown sections of Tahoe's forests. If and when fire enters those places, watershed devastation will be immediate, severe and long lasting.

Presidential visits and federal summits have decried the state of Tahoe's forests and driven home the need to reduce fuel loads to protect the lake's clarity. Legislators have sung the praises of renewable energy and other productive uses that could come from harvesting the excess vegetation around the lake. Federal, regional and local agencies all declare they're communicating and cooperating better than ever.

And still little changes, except that forests grow more overcrowded ... and the risks get worse.

Meanwhile, the thing people often resist may hold the key to what they most likely desire. The "get away from it all" feeling, spectacular views and recreation opportunities that are uniquely Tahoe share a common thread: proactive forestry.

What will it take to get past old perceptions of forest management? How many people realize the computer chip has replaced Paul Bunyan's ax in the woods? Can we get past hugging individual trees to caring for entire forests?

If we can, forestry becomes a practical solution – the means for making communities safer and delivering all the values people want from Tahoe.

If not, remember fondly your experiences near the once-clear water and support your local firefighters. They will need all the help they can get. ■