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Coalition in Tahoe looks to lessen impact of wildfires

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Ladder fuel, firefighters call it.

It's the snarl of low-growing manzanita, broom, snowbush, bitterbrush and more that covers the forest floor.

It's the accumulation of dead limbs, pine needles and leaves that choke a forest and turn it into an impenetrable tangle.

It's what turns a small fire into a roaring blaze that destroys forests, even homes, and can turn deadly.

But firefighters and conservation districts in the Lake Tahoe basin are taking a new approach when it comes to fighting wildfires. They're choosing ahead of time what kind of fire they want to fight and where they want to fight it.

"We can't stop wildfires," said Mark Novak, a battalion chief with the Tahoe Douglas Fire District, "but we can create a protective halo in the forests that surround schools and homes by removing the ladder fuel."

On Saturday, Novak was one of several firefighters and volunteers giving Tahoe area residents a walking tour of the Stateline 3 Fuels Reduction Area, a 95-acre plot that borders Kingsbury Middle School and homes, as well as a sewer district and a utility district.

It's a partnership among the Tahoe Douglas Fire District, the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team and the Nevada Fire Safe Council.

Crews used hand equipment as well as powerful machinery that masticates trees to transform a forest previously clogged with dense undergrowth into an open forest of tall Jeffrey pines – creating walking trails perfect for strolling, for enjoying the beautiful scenery.

It's a bit of an education process, said Elwood Miller, professor emeritus with the University of Nevada, Reno, and a volunteer with the project.

"What people think of as a normal forest is actually unhealthy in many cases. Fires used to come through every five or so years. It was a natural occurrence. If you stood in this same spot in the early 1800s, this forest would have looked much like this."

The project, funded by the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act, is one of about 15 sites that crews hope to complete this year. They range in size from 50 acres to 200 acres.

The Forest Service also employs similar methods and hopes to clean up about 300 acres of forest each year.

"You couldn't see through the forest when we began," Novak said. "If a fire came through now, it'd make a lot of smoke but wouldn't be such a threat to lives and property."

Before the forest was thinned, a wildfire burning in a 10 mph wind would have charred 389 acres in one hour, Novak said. With a 20 mph wind, that figure would rise to 1,500 acres.

But in a properly thinned forest, that same 10 mph wind would fan an 8-acre fire, and the 20 mph wind would burn 28 acres.

Keeping the forests healthy is an ongoing process. Crews will have to monitor the growth. Novak said he expects crews will do control burns in about five years.

"Come back in a year, maybe less," he said, "and the forest will look totally natural."

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