

In Brief



Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit

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Prescribed Fire

Prescribed fire is an important tool for ecosystem restoration and management.

Background: Before the logging and settlement that began with the Comstock era mining, frequent fires shaped the Lake Tahoe Basin forest. Tree ring studies show that fires burned every five to 20 years on average. These lower intensity fires helped create a complex mosaic pattern of towering old-growth conifers and diverse under story plants, thus helping to maintain a healthy ecological balance in the Tahoe Basin. Recognizing that agencies will not be able to reintroduce fire across the entire Lake Tahoe landscape, reintroducing fire into the Lake Tahoe environment will partially restore the ecosystem to its pre-settlement condition and function.

In the absence of natural fire, a thick layer of downed fuel and smaller trees have accumulated in Lake Tahoe's forests, creating a severe fire risk. The Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit (LTBMU) and other agencies are implementing a program of prescribed fire underburns that are scientifically appropriate for fire adapted ecosystems.



Although slash pile burning is not a restoration tool, it is an efficient fuel reduction treatment method in areas not suitable for underburns. For safety considerations near residential areas, slash pile burning is most often the best treatment method following thinning treatments in overly dense stands that would burn too intensely in an underburn causing unacceptable levels of tree scorch and mortality.

Current Situation: Since 1997, over 1000 acres of landscape underburns and over 3000 acres of prescribed pile burning has been implemented on the LTBMU. In these areas, surface fuels have been reduced and smaller live trees thinned, creating a zone where a damaging crown fire is less likely which provides a safer environment for firefighters.

Increasing the annual number of acres treated with prescribed fire will challenge our future capacity. Despite refinements and improvements in notification and public education, smoke intrusion into nearby neighborhoods will likely increase. Increasing the number of days suitable for burning means more summer burning, which is not likely to dramatically increase acreage accomplishments.

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