



Serene Lakes Property Owners' Association Community Wildfire Hazard Assessment

Conducted by:

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In Collaboration with SLPOA Homeowner Representatives:

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On November 8, 2011

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The Firewise Communities/USA[®] (www.firewise.org) program is designed to provide a collaborative and effective management approach for preserving the natural environment while pro-actively addressing the wildfire issue. Retaining the aesthetic view and protecting wildlife habitat are values of the residents who live there. The appeal and effectiveness of the Firewise program is that it may be tailored for adoption by any community and/or neighborhood that is committed to ensuring its citizens maximum protection from wildland fire. The following community assessment is intended as a resource to be used by the citizens of the Serene Lakes for creating and maintaining a Firewise Community. The Serene Lakes Property Owners Association is a voluntary homeowners group and is the primary organization to take action to improve the community. This wildfire hazard assessment is designed to give a brief description of the area for a basic understanding to community residents of both minor and significant fire hazards. The simple action plan developed from the information in this hazard assessment should be implemented in a collaborative manner, monitored and updated as needed to suit the community and a progress report made on the goals set in the plan annually. By continuing to keep a community focus on wildfire hazard mitigation, the community will ensure that their efforts will realize the goal of the SLPOA to become a nationally recognized Firewise Community/USA[®].

The wildfire hazard assessment team consisted of: Dean Levonian, Captain, Cal Fire; Bob Belden, Fire Prevention Officer, Truckee Fire Protection District; Dario Davidson, RPF #2314; Joanne Drummond, Executive Director, Fire Safe Council of Nevada County; and Karen Calvert, Director, Placer-Sierra Fire Safe Council. Local residents and Firewise Committee Members Ryan Murano, Bill and Diane Kirkham and Anne Chadwick were also in attendance to provide their local knowledge and address community concerns.



The Hazard Assessment Team (l to r): Ryan Murano; Dean Levonian; Bob Belden; Karen Calvert; Dario Davidson; Diane Kirkham, Anne Chadwick and Bill Kirkham.

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The community assessment was completed on November 8, 2011 just after the first snowfall of the season. During the assessment, members of the group discussed the fire risks to individual homes and the watershed. Discussions of how best to mitigate the identified risks took place along with education about defensible space, ember intrusion on structures, forest health, evacuation and Firewise landscaping. This report should be distributed to members of the community and the action plan developed by the Firewise Committee presented at an upcoming community event.

AREA DESCRIPTION

The Serene Lakes subdivision is located in Placer County, near Soda Springs and Donner Summit. Lying just below 7000 feet elevation, Serene Lakes experiences long, cold winters with some of the heaviest snowfall in North America - typically around 500 inches per year. According to the nearby Central Sierra Snow Laboratory, average annual precipitation is 54 inches, with 76 percent falling between November and March. Average snow depth is over 10 feet. Summers are mostly dry, with average annual summer precipitation of less than 3 inches, mostly from occasional thundershowers. However, the majority of thunderstorms are dry, with gusty winds and lightning, and frequently small fires are started by lightning strikes.

Serene Lakes lies in a high glacially carved valley with steep mountain slopes surrounding the subdivision. Soils are sandy, well drained, and derived from a combination of granitic and andesitic parent materials. Lodgepole pine is the dominant vegetation type within the subdivision, with red fir and Sierra alpine mixed conifer forests within the surrounding areas. Very small grass and sedge dominated areas are dispersed throughout where sunlight is abundant at ground level. A large, wet meadow surrounding Lake Norden lies to the northeast, providing an extensive fuel break. Additionally, Soda Springs ski area is situated north of the subdivision, and with its cleared ski runs also provides a good fuel break.

The biggest threat of fire is the North Fork American River canyon to the south. This is a deep canyon with steep slopes and heavy fuels. The canyon is oriented to the prevailing southwest summer winds and a fire could make rapid, high-intensity runs uphill toward Serene Lakes.



Royal Gorge's Ice Lakes Lodge is embedded in the SLPOA community.

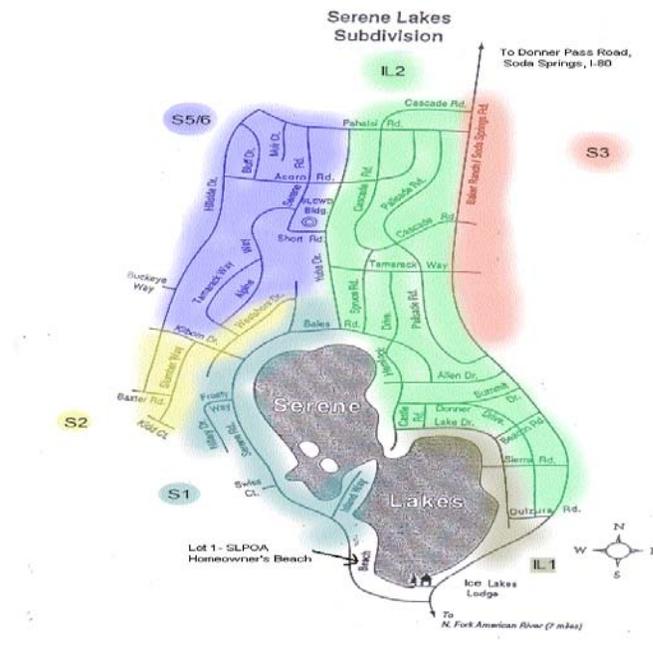
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The property surrounding Serene Lakes is a mix of public land (Tahoe National Forest) and large private parcels (Royal Gorge ski resort, Soda Springs and Sugar Bowl ski areas). Due to the diligence of the SLPOA, the Tahoe National Forest is currently planning a thinning and fuel reduction project on 18 acres on the east side of Serene Lakes funded by a Forest Service Title II Resource Advisory Committee grant.

The Serene Lakes community has approximately 800 homes with approximately 200 lots remaining undeveloped. Not all property owners in the subdivisions are members of the voluntary SLPOA association.

There are various phases of development which are shown in the color coded map below: Serene Lakes 1 (blue); Ice Lakes 1 (grey); Serene Lakes 2 (yellow); Ice Lakes 2 (green); Serene Lakes 3 (red); and Serene Lakes 5/6 (purple.) Each phase has its own set of Covenants, Conditions & Restrictions (CC&R's) which address various aspects of life in the subdivision. Some of the CC&R's are so outdated that some of their provisions are illegal including a condition that greenbelt areas not be managed for vegetation. California state law under Public Resource Code 4291 mandates 100 feet of vegetation management around structures for defensible space. This law trumps the CC&R of the subdivisions and is enforced by Truckee Fire Protection District and Cal Fire. All property owners within the SLPOA should set a high priority in managing the vegetation surrounding their homes to reduce the effects of catastrophic wildfire in the community. This would include not only defensible space around homes, but also vacant lots which generally fall within 100 feet of other homes established in the community.



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Serene Lakes properties include areas described as "greenbelts" in the Covenants, Conditions & Restrictions (CC&R's). In addition, SLPOA operates a Property Owners Beach at the south end of the two Serene Lakes. Since these community assets are embedded among developed home sites there should be a high priority set in managing the vegetation in these areas for wildfire protection.

The SLPOA has taken action to educate their community about the fire hazard and how to mitigate it through their newsletter, email distribution and physical demonstration projects. The SLPOA has worked with the Fire Safe Council of Nevada County as volunteers to host a grant funded community green waste drop site in the parking lot of the Soda Springs Ski Resort. Grant funding for the program has not been secured and in 2011, the SLPOA funded the program from their budget. This program has yielded a tremendous amount of ground work for fuels reductions over the past five years and would continue to motivate residents if it may be continued.

Forest Health

The forests within Serene Lakes consist of a mosaic of thickets of young lodgepole pines occupying areas disturbed during subdivision development, and stands over 100 years old that are exhibiting early signs of decline. The development of Serene Lakes subdivisions created patchy disturbances that originally promoted a mosaic of vegetation types. Over time, lodgepole pine thickets have dominated at the expense of willows, alpine shrubs, perennials flowering plants, grasses and sedges. The original lodgepole pine forests have matured and are beginning their decline. Lodgepole pine is a relatively short-lived conifer species, typically occupying perennially moist sites or sites periodically disturbed by stand replacing fires. Lodgepole pines are prolific seed producers and rapidly occupy suitable sites at densities exceeding 10,000 trees per acre. Because canopy closure is rapid, excluding light to the forest floor, understory vegetation is generally sparse, or composed of shade tolerant species, such as braken fern. Over time inter-tree competition thins the forest, accumulating woody fuels in the understory. After 100-200 years the dominant lodgepole pines begin to show signs of decline – crown thinning and dying tops. At this stage the stand becomes susceptible to bark beetle infestations, especially during droughts. In the past, periodic, high intensity wildfires would have occurred approximately each century, killing most of the lodgepole pines and beginning a new cycle of regeneration and growth. There is no historic record of a stand replacing fire occurring in the Serene Lakes area. Fire scars may be seen on a few of the larger trees, possibly from small, low intensity ground fires. Many of the dominant, pre-development, lodgepole pines are reaching the final phase of their normal life span.

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Two common disease agents of Sierra Nevada lodgepole pines were observed within the Serene Lakes subdivision. The infection level is quite low compared to other nearby sites and most of the trees appeared to be disease free.

Western gall rust (*Peridermium harknessii*) – a parasitic fungus that attacks young trees and creates globose galls and cankers on the branches and trunks of host trees. Young trees can be killed by the disease if infections are numerous, however, most trees live to maturity with the cankers growing slowly with the tree.



Western Gall Rust – branch gall.

Stalactiform rust (*Peridermium stalactiforme*) – another parasitic fungus which needs the presence of paint brush (*Castilleja ssp.*) to complete its lifecycle. Again, the disease is not normally fatal to its host. It forms vertically elongated cankers on lodgepole pine trunks.

Trees with cankers (open wounds) are susceptible to wood rotting fungi, with structural failure and collapse a possibility. Infected trees near homes should be evaluated for removal for safety reasons. In addition, trees with soft, rotten wood tend to ignite more readily and burn more completely than healthy green trees. These same trees, with rotting wood, provide a source of cavities, valuable as wildlife nesting and denning sites. Where they are not a hazard to infrastructure they should be retained for wildlife uses.

Tree overcrowding is the greatest threat to the health of the forest ecosystems at Serene Lakes. Trees growing in crowded conditions are competing with one another for the limited site resources. During times of drought this can lead to a rapid buildup in bark beetle populations and cause widespread tree mortality. This is exactly what occurred recently near Lake Arrowhead in southern California, and more locally at Donner Lake State Park. While it is difficult to thin groups of mature trees surrounded by homes and other infrastructure, considerable thought should be given to thinning the younger groups of lodgepole pines while it is still relatively inexpensive and low risk.

Thinning the lodgepole pines will also allow more sunlight, moisture and soil nutrients to be available to the other native plants, increasing biodiversity. There is an abundance of willows that, with removal of some lodgepole pines, could thrive. Willows provide important benefits to local wildlife such as browse, cover, nesting sites and beneficial insect diversity. Willows can also provide a seasonal screen that will not be damaged by

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snow removal, as the small lodgepole pines near roads have been. Red firs can also be encouraged to grow by removing the adjacent lodgepole pines.

FUELS MANAGEMENT

Many landowners within the Serene Lakes have already begun or implemented fuel reduction projects. Additionally, the local Water District (working with SLPOA) has also implemented several demonstration projects to provide living examples of effective defensible space for their residents. In addition to reduced fire hazard for the property, the benefits of this work are;

- **Reduced fire hazards for neighboring properties** – the condition of each parcel affects the fire hazard on adjacent parcels
- **More aesthetically pleasing landscapes** – more closely resembling early historic forest conditions
- **Better long-term health of residual trees and shrubs** – less stress from competition
- **Improved wildlife habitats**
- **Increase in plant diversity** – more sunlight to the ground improves growth of wildflowers and grasses
- **Maintain homeowner's insurance policy**



SLPOA defensible space demonstration project home site.

Fuel management's goal is to reduce the intensity and rate of spread of approaching wildfires and reduce the potential of a single structure fire developing into a large wildfire. Fires can be classified into three types:

- **Ground fires** burn along the ground, moving slowly, with low heat output. Many times they only smolder. These fires pose the lowest danger and are carried primarily by leaf litter or mowed, dry grass.
- **Surface fires** burn along the ground with greater intensity and can move rapidly. They can cause significant damage to structures as well as trees and shrubs. They are carried by leaf litter, dry grasses, twigs, branches, small shrubs and trees and downed logs. Surface fires can kill large, mature trees by girdling, crown desiccation or root damage.
- **Crown fires** burn from the ground to the tops of the trees. These are by far the most destructive and dangerous fires. A crown fire cannot be sustained without a

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high intensity surface fire feeding convective and radiant heat into the tree canopy. Large quantities of fuel on the ground combined with ladder fuels lead to catastrophic crown fires.

We can predict with reasonable certainty which type of fire will occur in an area by evaluating the existing fuel. **Fuel** is anything available for combustion – in our case vegetation, live or dead. The factors that determine which type of fire will occur include some that we have no control over and others that we can manipulate with fuel management.

Factors we have no control over:

- **Topography** – Heat rises, so fires burn hotter up slopes. The steeper the slope the hotter and faster a fire will burn. Gullies can channel hot gasses and fire, causing a “chimney” effect. Consider these factors when selecting a building site and in fuel reduction projects.
- **Atmospheric conditions** – humidity, ambient temperature, wind speed and direction. Our prevailing winds come from the southwest, therefore, most of our fires burn toward the northeast. Primarily in the autumn dry, hot winds can blow day and night, out of the northeast (Santa Ana winds). These winds, with accompanying low humidity cause the most dangerous fires.
- **Fuel moisture content** – without irrigation, this factor is dependent on the atmospheric conditions. Small diameter fuels (pine needles) can change moisture content in a matter of hours. Larger fuels (logs) may take days or weeks to significantly change in moisture content.



The 2008 American River Complex Fire burned 20,541 acres.

Factors we can manipulate:

- **Amount of fuel** – more fuel equals greater fire intensity and rate of spread
- **Type of fuels** – size, structure, arrangement, flammability (natural oils) all affect fire behavior and should be targeted for manipulation
- **Continuity of fuels** - horizontally – patchy or continuous
- vertically – ladder fuels vs. open layer between ground and tree canopy

Planning fuel management should consider various zones surrounding the structures. Utilizing these zones helps set priorities and bring into focus where the greatest hazards exist.

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Home Ignition Zone includes the first 10 feet surrounding structures. Fuels in this zone frequently lead to ignition of structures. Keep fuel to a minimum, including live plants, wood piles, and patio furniture. Patrol this zone regularly during fire season to be sure leaves or pine needles have not accumulated near the structures.

Defensible Space Zone is the first 30 feet from structures. This zone can include irrigated landscaping or properly maintained native vegetation.

Reduced Fuel Zone includes the area at least 100 feet from structures, or greater where steep slopes occur or heavy landscape fuel loading is present.

In managing fuels, the most obvious thing to do is reduce the amount of fuel. In a forest situation this can be done by removing ground fuels by cutting, raking, burning or chipping. This method also reduces the continuity of fuels, creating a patchy situation.

Pruning of the trees will reduce the quantity of fuel and affect the vertical continuity of fuels. Pruning trees to 10 feet (or no more than ½ the total height) will greatly reduce the ladder fuels when combined with thinning and ground fuel removal.

Carefully planned and maintained landscaping aids in fire hazard reduction. Well irrigated, low growing plants are suitable within the Home Ignition Zone.



Many residents in the SLPOA have created and maintain effective defensible space.

Most homeowners in the community have taken some action to mitigate the fire risk to their homes and neighborhood. This has been accomplished by a variety of landscaping approaches. Some utilize the natural setting while others maintain

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landscape designs. Either way, the reduction and manipulation of vegetative fuels will greatly reduce the wildfire potential in the community.

ACCESS

There is effectively only one access road into the Serene Lakes community. The secondary access is extremely rugged and impassable during the winter months. Access roads into the community are maintained by Nevada County and Placer County. There is a high density of trees that should be thinned within ten feet of the road shoulder with a fifteen foot vertical clearance in order to accommodate fire suppression resources. Overall conditions were acceptable with notable exceptions. The SLPOA should contact the department of transportation to request roadside vegetation maintenance. However, much of the overgrowth near the roadways was intentionally left by landowners for screening. These landowners need to be educated on alternatives to provide privacy while reducing the fire hazard for evacuation purposes.



Access road into the SLPOA community.

EMBER INTRUSION

Even with the best individual Home Ignition Zones providing fire protection, a wildfire in the area will create a significant amount of firebrands (burning embers) which may ignite vegetation and structures. These tiny firebrands may represent the most significant threat of fire within the community. If a single home in this community was to ignite by firebrands during a wildfire, it would place the surrounding homes and watershed at risk. In order to greatly reduce the ignitability of homes in your community, residents should inspect roofs, decks and the immediate ground surrounding these structures (within 10 feet) for fine fuels. Remember – fuels may be non-vegetative and include items such as furniture, door mats, brooms, and decorative items such as baskets and planters. Any fuels found in this area should be removed regularly – particularly during fire season - in order to reduce the potential of a firebrand ignition. The goal of removing the fine fuels from within ten feet of the structure is to help stop firebrands from triggering a structure ignition from items immediately adjacent to the home.

Serene Lakes is interspersed amongst the forest, trees are expected and appreciated around homes. Hardening structures from ember intrusion will increase their

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survivability in the event of a wildfire and subsequent fire branding in the community. Results from the 1961 Belair-Brentwood Fire found that 95 percent of the structures that survived maintained 30-60 feet of clearance and had non-flammable roofs. Wood shake roofs do occur within the community to a minor extent. Homes with wood shake roofs present a threat to surrounding homes and the environment because they are easily ignited by firebrands. New California building codes for Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) construction require fire rating roofing and eventually all wood shake roofs will be replaced to minimize the fire hazard they create. Although wood shake roofs are only a minor component in the community, roof maintenance is an ongoing issue to



Ember intrusion testing by the Institute for Business & Home Safety. Learn more at: <http://www.disastersafety.org/>

homes everywhere. All roof types may ignite if allowed to accumulate flammable material under overhangs, in gutters and other complex areas of the roof.

Throughout the community, many roofs and gutters have an accumulation of flammable materials such as pine needles or leaves. These materials are easily ignited by firebrands and may put the entire home a risk, which in turn places the entire community at risk. These materials are also easily mitigated by sweeping or blowing off and will greatly reduce the potential for

home ignition.

Many structures have wood siding or wood construction features. Wood tends to stand up fairly well to radiant heat, although it can ignite when flames or super heated air (convection) heat comes into direct contact with it. Many structures have highly flammable vegetation close to or in direct contact with wood siding including dry grasses and juniper landscaping. In the event this flammable material ignites, it would move to the structure and ignite it. In order to mitigate for this type of siding, residents must ensure that direct flame contact cannot occur. Residents should remove highly flammable and dead vegetation within a minimum of 10 feet from the house. Residents should consider boxing in the eaves of the home for increased protection from firebrand intrusion. Other flammable material such as coconut door mats and deck furniture should also be removed from this area. Landscaping should be well irrigated if located within the 10 feet directly adjacent to the structure.

Privacy is a common issue in most communities including Serene Lakes. The use of "vegetative screens" was found along road and around houses. Vegetative screens should be thinned and pruned in order to reduce the risk of ignition and fire spread. Removing the smaller trees in these areas will also promote growth in the larger trees

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that are less susceptible to fire and enhance overall forest health. Another way to mitigate the fire risk associated with privacy screening residents desire is the break up the horizontal and vertical continuity of the screening by placing clumps of vegetation to provide strategic visual barriers.

Many homes in the community utilize wood as a source of heat. One of the fire risks associated with using this type of fuels to heat homes is that the wood needs to be stored somewhere. Some of the wood here is stored next to homes or other structures. Wood piles are highly flammable, hence their use for heat fuel, and burn for extensive periods of time. During the fire season all wood piles should be stored at least 30 feet from all structures or stored in building with fire rated roofing. Another mitigation alternative is to utilize a fire rated tarp to securely cover the wood pile to greatly reduce the likelihood of firebrand ignition. Wood fuel pellets should be treated in the same manner as natural firewood.



Firebrand testing on various decking material products. For more information visit: <http://firecenter.berkeley.edu/>

Decks help residents enjoy the natural environment as living space. However, they pose a significant fire threat to the home if not properly maintained. Remember – if it's attached to the house, its part of the house. Many decks have accumulations of flammable materials both on and underneath them. If this material was ignited by a firebrand, it would easily ignite the deck and then the house. Please note that products such as "Trex" decking material is highly flammable. All decks should be kept free of flammable material, both above and below, in order to reduce the threat of a firebrand ignition. Where feasible, decks should be screened with a 1/8 inch metal mesh screening in order to reduce the amount of firebrand impingement and flammable material build up. Stairs may also be screened in the same manner. A piece of metal flashing between the deck and the house will also reduce the exposure from firebrands.

Another consideration for decks, entry ways or other wooden walkways is outdoor furniture décor and their potential source of firebrand ignitions. Outdoor furniture cushions are very flammable and were observed on some decks. These cushions can ignite and put the entire structure at risk. It is advised to store such items when not in use. This goes for anything flammable including door mats, brooms, umbrellas, etc.

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Inadequately screened vents are a main source of firebrand ignition potential. By using a 1/8 inch metal mesh screen on all home vents, homeowners will greatly reduce the firebrand access to the structure. This standard is now California building code within the Wildland Urban Interface (most all of Nevada County.)

Double paned windows (with one tempered glass) provide a better heat shield than single pane windows. Using this type of window provides increased insulation from the outside elements and benefit the home through associated energy savings as well as increased fire safety.

PROPANE TANKS

In the winter of 2011, excessive snow loads on propane tanks caused public safety officials to require all snow and ice to be removed from propane tanks, regulators and supply lines to ground level. The tremendous weight of the snow caused the plumbing – valves, regulators and piping to break and leak. A voluntary evacuation order was put into effect while Placer County and the Truckee Fire Protection District continued working with property owners to remediate leaking propane tanks. Propane tanks should have a snow cover to mitigate the snow load hazard.

The SLPOA board of directors convened a “Propane Task Force” with a mission to avoid a reoccurrence. The Propane Task Force is committed that the community must never be subjected to the dangers, expenses and inconveniences they endured during the winter of 2011. The Task Force will develop recommended actions and educational materials on safe propane practices. The Task Force began their work in June 2011 and provides this report on Labor Day weekend. This report has to be considered as only one part of a long effort to ensure that the issues of 2011 are never repeated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Take precautions to ensure that high intensity fire remains at least 100 feet away from homes. Continue working to eliminate low intensity fire from coming into contact with structures by creating and maintaining a “fire free zone” – allowing no fire to burn within a minimum of 10 feet of homes.
- Continue working with the Tahoe National Forest to promote thinning and fuel reduction on other National Forest lands surrounding Serene Lakes.
- Encourage the new owners of Royal Gorge ski resort to manage the adjacent lands to reduce fuel loads, ladder fuels and forest overcrowding.
- Within the subdivision, thin lodgepole pine stands where feasible. In the younger stands this can be done over time, in phases, thinning as needed to keep crowns from touching. Many roadside thickets have been retained as visual screens and have been damaged by snow removal operations. These thickets should be

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thinned to promote the health of the most dominant, vigorous trees, encourage growth and development of willows and other low flammability native shrubs, or be removed altogether. Over time these thickets suppress growth on their lower branches by shading, causing the "screen" to rise vertically and become less functional.

- Monitor the mature lodgepole pines for bark beetle attacks, particularly during droughts or if adjacent property is experiencing a bark beetle infestation. Quick action can usually avert a disaster of widespread pine mortality.
- Continue to promote the good work already done by some landowners. Others may need more time to adjust to the concept of cutting trees. Help them to see the benefits – lower fuel loading, healthier trees, more biodiversity, higher visual quality of the parcel and neighborhood.
- Maintain good clearance along the roads, particularly the evacuation route to Highway 40. Thinning of the lodgepole pine stands outside of the right-of-way will improve overall forest health and visual quality.
- Continue to educate the community to take action.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

By adopting the Firewise Communities/USA[®] program, and continuing the great work the community has already accomplished, residents can create a balance that will allow them to safely co-exist with wildfire while maintaining the natural forest setting the residents desire. Most people have chosen to live in the Sierras in part because of the quality of the environment, climate, wildlife and aesthetic appeal. It is important for the residents to understand the implications of the choices they are making regarding fire safety. These choices, such as home siting, building materials selection, landscaping and proper maintenance of the home, directly relate to the ignitability of their home and surrounding environment during a wildfire event.

NEXT STEPS

In order to complete the Firewise Community application, the SLPOA Firewise Committee needs to accept this community wildfire hazard assessment and develop an action plan in response in order to pro-actively address the issues identified and track progress on the goals set. The action plan will integrate the following:

- Annual Firewise Community/USA education day event to be held each year.
- Invest a minimum of \$2.00 annually per capita in the Firewise Communities/USA program. This work may be done by volunteers (valued at \$20/hr), county

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employees or grant funded contractors on priorities set by the SLPOA Firewise Committee.

- Submit an annual report to the Firewise Communities/USA program to retain the community Firewise designation.
- Other priorities for the community may include new resident's education, roadside clearing days, newsletter education and maintenance reminders, guest speakers at board meetings, etc.

Please remember that there are many actions your community may take to reduce the effects of wildfire. Your actions directly impact whether your home will survive a wildfire. In the event of a wildfire, there will NOT be a fire engine to protect every home. It is up to you, not firefighting agencies, to ensure the survivability of your home and community. Take pro-active measures now to protect your home and community before the fire comes. A prepared community is a safer community. Good luck and be Firewise!

KEEP UP THE GREAT WORK SLPOA!

