

July 17, 2007

Dear Colleague:

As victims of the 2007 Angora Fire in South Lake Tahoe begin the rebuilding process, I wanted to bring the attached editorial to your attention.

At 250-plus homes destroyed, the Angora Fire ranks as one of state's worst fire disasters. Still, many forest experts are quietly suggesting that damage to Lake Tahoe's forests and forested communities could have been far worse, considering the dangerously high forest fuel levels in the area. Only quick action by brave fire fighters and well-timed calm weather was Lake Tahoe's saving grace.

Forest fire is a necessary part of a healthy forest ecosystem. But modern "catastrophic" fires - the kind we saw in Lake Tahoe and Southern California's deadly Lake Arrowhead Fire of 2003 - are not. These stand-destroying fires not only threaten lives and homes, they also wreak havoc on the environment by ruining habitat, polluting mountain streams, and releasing tons of greenhouse gases and particulates into the air.

As this column suggests, protecting California's forests from catastrophic fire is possible, and legislation supported unanimously by our delegation in 1998 - the Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group Forest Recovery Act - is a starting point. The QLG Pilot Project was the product of a local environmentalist-logger coalition and seeks to strategically thin the Plumas, Lassen, and Tahoe National Forests in order to protect at risk communities and watersheds from catastrophic fire. Yet despite its public safety and forest health emphasis, the QLG has been repeatedly blocked by a handful of activists. I hope you will join me in urging the full implementation of the QLG and the application of similar efforts elsewhere throughout our state to protect communities and the environment from the next devastating wildfire.

Sincerely,

/s WALLY HERGER  
Member of Congress

## San Francisco Chronicle

### **A PREVENTABLE TRAGEDY**

### **Environmentalism run amok creates growing tinderbox**

Richard Carlson  
Sunday, July 1, 2007

Here I sit, looking down at lovely Lake Tahoe, but also looking down the hill at the fir forest growing ever thicker and more deadly. Fires always burn uphill. If a fire ever starts at the bottom of our hill, we'll have 10 minutes to escape before the one road out is cut off by the fire. Behind my home, it's nearly impossible to hike off trail because you have to wade through knee-deep piles of dead branches.

The forest is ready to explode. We have too many trees, but no one dares do anything about it.

Plenty of ingredients during the past 150 years have fueled the fire that has denuded hillsides at Lake Tahoe. Gold Rush clear-cutting. Home and ski resort development. Mismanagement of the ecosystem.

But sometimes lost in the discussion is another key ingredient: the legal, political and bureaucratic battle between old and new conservationists. This war has led to policy paralysis -- and the forests and the fire danger keep growing.

The Forest Service finally is mending its ways and, led by traditional science-based conservationists, has tried to get approval for more commercial thinning of the forests. Thinning the forests commercially is the only economically viable option: There isn't enough money for publicly funded hand clearing, and high fuel loads make controlled burns too dangerous.

Commercial thinning isn't pretty, but it works. The publicly funded hand thinning is like trying to empty the ocean with a teacup. The Sierra forest problem is like Iraq; there is no good way out of the mess we've created for ourselves.

Effective but environmentally safe forest thinning requires compromise between environmentalists and commercial loggers. Unfortunately, the new, more ideological environmental movement refuses such compromise. This refusal is exemplified by the Quincy Library Group.

The group drafted an agreement among Sierra conservationists, industry and political leaders that would have allowed enough controlled commercial thinning of Sierra forests to actually make a dent in the deadly growing forest fuel loads. The agreement was killed by lawsuits from the new, more radical urban environmentalists who value money and ideology above science, homes and human life.

The leaders of such groups as California's chapters of the Sierra Club knew that their urban constituencies could be depended on to contribute to any anti-logging campaign.

Compromise would lose money and support to more-radical groups. Having spent decades creating the image of the evil logger as their favorite fundraiser, the urban environmentalists didn't dare be caught talking to one. Allied as the Sierra Forest Legacy, these organizations have largely stopped effective efforts to deal with the fast-growing fire danger in Sierra forests.

The problem, of course, is that doing nothing is by far the worst option.

The Quincy Library Group agreement came in 1993. Sen. Diane Feinstein sponsored legislation in 1998, but the decade since has seen far more litigation than action. While the lawyers argue, and the environmental fundraisers happily collect their tribute, the forest fuel loads keep growing.

In Tahoe, the situation is exacerbated by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (known locally as the Tree Nazis). The agency's rules override fire marshal guidelines and generally make desperately needed tree thinning impossible. Unless you go through an insanely complex, expensive and lengthy permit process, you can't touch a tree that's larger than 6 inches in diameter, even if it's next to your house. And 6- to 12-inch firs are exactly the type of tree that is the greatest fire danger.

It's an interesting choice: Listen to the fire marshal and save your home and your life, or risk being bankrupted by lawyers of the Tahoe planning agency. Why the agency has been so reluctant to allow more tree cutting is hard to understand.

A major fire is the worst possible environmental event: It would destroy both the land and the lake. How many homes and lives must be lost before we stop building the Tahoe Funeral Pyre?

*Richard Carlson is chairman of Spectrum Economics, a consulting firm based in Palo Alto. He has owned a home at Lake Tahoe since 1986. Contact us at [insight@sfchronicle.com](mailto:insight@sfchronicle.com).*

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/07/01/INGMVONLIQ1.DTL>

*This article appeared on page **F - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle*