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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FIRE HAZARD RATINGS IN SOUTH LAKE TAHOE MAY NOT PROTECT HOMEOWNERS

DAVIS, CA, July 11, 2002. The Gondola fire on July 3, 2002 was a wake up call for most South Lake Tahoe homeowners on the importance of fire safety around homes. Most homeowners just didn't think they were at risk because there hasn't been a fire in a long time. They now know that this was a false sense of security. For years, homeowners have been asked to create defensible space at least 30 feet around their home, or to the property line if it is nearer, and prune trees and remove ladder fuels. This is a requirement under the California Public Resources Code 4291. However, Dr. Lisa de Jong at the Center for Urban Forest Research says, "This law may not be sufficient to protect homeowners with small lots. Though compliance with PRC 4291 may increase fire safety, many residents in the urban-wildland interface do not comply because they just don't think it could happen to them. Unfortunately, these non-compliant homeowners adversely affect the fire hazard of all their neighbors."

The urban forest of South Lake Tahoe is a complex matrix of fuels that poses a significant risk to homes and businesses. Just cleaning up parcels may not be enough. According to Dr. de Jong, "the combination of small lot size and non-compliance with

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PRC 4291 poses a significant barrier to effective individual and community fire hazard mitigation. Not enough people are actively involved in compliance and even if they have made the effort to protect their home they may still be at risk if their neighbor is not compliant. Fire safety is not an individual effort, it requires the active participation of all homeowners and businesses to create a FireWise community.”

The Center’s research reveals several interesting findings that should be cause for concern among residents. The citywide non-compliance rate for defensible space is 86%, the citywide non-compliance rate for landscape maintenance is 66%, and over 57% of the parcels are non-compliant for both defensible space and maintenance. The Center’s report describes a fire hazard assessment conducted on private, developed lots in South Lake Tahoe. The fire hazard was rated according to the national standards in NFPA 299, homeowner compliance with PRC 4291, the type of construction materials used in homes, irrigation practices, and the influence on a parcel’s fire hazard by neighbors.

The city has good roads, available water, signage, and the presence of fire-fighting resources, which could add to homeowner ambivalence. However, the analysis of the components that involve homeowner choice, such as defensible space, landscape maintenance, irrigation, and building construction, reveals a very hazardous situation - the majority of homeowners just aren’t in compliance. Plus, the problem is compounded by the fact that the area is dominated by small lots. The required amount of clearance just can’t be achieved in some cases and, therefore, will be insufficient to reduce fire hazard. This indicates that a different approach to fire hazard assessment in

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South Lake Tahoe is needed if we want to know the true fire hazard of an individual parcel. The hazard assessment must consider homeowner practices, lot size, and neighboring fire hazards. Results will serve to focus efforts on obtaining community participation to improve fire safety for everyone.

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