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Officials tackle issues of access, communication at town hall meeting about fire in Yuba River canyon

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The key to successfully fighting a fire in the Yuba River canyon is early detection, spotting the blaze before it grows over 10 acres.

A problem Nevada County agencies regularly face is reaching the blaze. They often have vehicles lining the roads where access is best. Cell phone service is spotty or worse.

"No joke about it — this canyon is a huge risk," said Matt Wallen, a Cal Fire battalion chief, when talking about last week's fire near Edwards Crossing.

"Had we been 10 to 15 minutes later without retardant, we would probably still be dealing with that fire right now."

Wallen was one of several fire, law enforcement and environmental officials who spoke at a Monday evening town hall forum about fire at the Nevada Theatre. Over 100 people attended the meeting sponsored by YubaNet and KVMR.

The fire near Edwards Crossing, which grew to 3 acres, was the impetus for the town hall gathering. Officials on Monday detailed their respective roles and fielded questions about fire across the canyon.

Capt. Jeff Pettitt, with the Nevada County Sheriff's Office, said visitors to the river clog the road. Over 80 citations have been issued at Purdon and Edwards crossings in the past 35 days.

"Half of them are parking under a 'No Parking' sign," Pettitt said.

The land itself makes access difficult. Firefighters must at times hike to a fire once they reach an access point.

Access is difficult for both authorities and visitors. Jordan Fisher Smith, one attendee who spoke Monday, suggested using state money to fund foot patrols. Smith wondered, however, whether local agencies had the manpower even if the funds materialized.

Matthew Green, chief ranger of the State Parks' Sierra District, noted his office has half the employees it did five years ago. He called his staff a reactionary force.

Pettitt said getting authorities into the canyon is a staffing issue for his office as well.

Officials agreed that the canyon needed better cell service, better access and a more proactive approach to fighting fire.

Tahoe National Forest Fire Chief Shelly Allen said more fire fuel reduction is necessary, a step that would hinder the spread of fires.

Green agreed that planning ahead is required to make a shift away from reaction.

"It takes a village," said Pascale Fusshoeller, co-founder of YubaNet. "That's why we're here."

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