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Working Together To Keep Tahoe Mussel Free

**By Joanne Marchetta
TRPA Executive Director**

With Memorial Day upon us, we have another summer season to enjoy and celebrate – kayaking the Lake, a brisk swim, boating to Emerald Bay, and more. Finally after the snow recedes and the waters warm, this is the season boaters and water recreationists wait for. But appearances can be deceiving. Over a number of years, invaders have entered the Lake: Species that are not native to Tahoe have affected the Lake's ecosystem. These invaders include curly leaf pondweed, the Asian clam, Eurasian milfoil and others. Each has been introduced by seemingly benign activities of residents or visitors enjoying the Lake. Yet another and arguably the worst invader is now at our doorstep, further threatening Lake Tahoe. Quagga and zebra mussels are carried between water bodies by boaters who use multiple recreational lakes.

Currently, there is no threat more imminent to the Lake than the risk of infestation by these aquatic invasive mussels. Our collective challenge is to successfully keep these destructive invaders out. The stakes are high, and failure is not an option. To fail could mean unimaginable environmental and economic consequences. To be successful, we each have a role to play, and by that I mean residents and visitors alike.

TRPA responded quickly when we first learned of the threat. The quick action and wide collaboration among many other agencies and organizations are the reasons we have been successful to date. The boating community in particular has played an essential role by participating in boat inspections at ramps and launch facilities. This summer we are increasing our vigilance and are asking even more of Lake Tahoe boaters. All launch ramps will be staffed with boat inspectors trained to search for invaders like the quagga and zebra mussels where they hide. Because grant funding that has been used for inspections so far is running out, an inspection fee must now be collected. The fee has been structured to give a break to Tahoe-only boaters – we've listened to the locals on this issue.

Fees are unpopular, and the decision to begin collecting an inspection fee from boaters was not an easy one. But in the end after considering all other options it was necessary. We were faced with a choice between doing so or closing launch points in order to protect the Lake from an immediate and potentially devastating threat. A great deal of thought went into making certain the fee would be as equitable as possible. Because the fee structure is set according to the size of vessel being inspected, the fee is related to the amount of time each inspection will take. Further, the amount being collected is no more than what will be necessary to keep the inspection program going. Tahoe Resource Conservation District, which employs the inspectors, receives and administers the funds.

Those boaters who launch only at Lake Tahoe can avoid paying for multiple inspections by receiving an inspection seal when they remove their vessels from the Lake. The seal attaches

your boat to its trailer. If still intact when you launch again on Lake Tahoe, no inspection and no fee will be necessary.

While we recognize the economic impacts of this new fee to boaters, the inspection program is crucial to protect the lake. These invasive species have moved from the Great Lakes throughout the Western United States on recreational boats and trailers. The environmental and economic devastation these aquatic invaders cause is well documented. Once they take hold, zebra and quagga mussels reproduce and spread rapidly, covering lake bottoms, adhering to rocks, clogging drinking water intake systems, and damaging boats. Their razor-sharp shells wash up on beaches, making barefoot walks in the sand impossible. Their voracious eating denies indigenous fishes and other species access to nutrients they need to survive. No water body where infestation has occurred has successfully eradicated these invaders. We cannot let our guard down or it will happen here.

So, our focus must remain on both preventing the introduction of quagga and zebra mussels while working to successfully manage those aquatic invaders already at Lake Tahoe, such as the Asian clam. Our efforts will require the continued participation of the boating community, scientists and researchers, volunteers, well-trained inspectors, managers of private and public launch facilities, the conservation community, and all others like you who have a stake in Lake Tahoe. Moving forward, we are improving the inspection program learning as we go and remaining open to constructive feedback and suggestions from all.

It is important that we get the word out about the inspection program, the new fee, and this real threat – so we are enlisting your help in making sure accurate information is disseminated about what is happening at Lake Tahoe. I appreciate and want to thank all who have contributed to this effort thus far – in particular those who have given of their money and time. In the end, we will have a mussel-free Lake Tahoe to show for it. For up-to-date information about the inspection program, call us at 1-888-TAHO-ANS or check the web at www.protecttahoe.org.

- Joanne Marchetta is Executive Director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. For more information, visit www.trpa.org.

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