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## Facing the Financial Challenge of Restoring Lake Tahoe Head-On

By Joanne S. Marchetta, Executive Director

The goal of a restored Lake Tahoe is a shared vision for many organizations. This goal unites TRPA with the work of the public and private sectors, the community and property owners, and businesses and environmental groups—to name just a few. Achieving restoration takes collective will and, to be frank, substantial investment. Repairing what happened before is a critical part of the strategy to return Lake Tahoe to its famed clarity and restore the full range of ecosystem functions. Our legacy land use impacts are significant: three quarters of Tahoe's marshes have been developed and 90 percent of existing homes and businesses were built without environmental design.

TRPA recognizes that plans and regulations are mere frameworks; without more, they won't restore an entire ecosystem. Correcting past harms requires capital as well as vision. There has already been substantial investment in restoration projects under the collaborative Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program (EIP). More than 540 acres of marsh and meadow land have been restored. Stormwater infiltration measures, which are critical to reducing the fine sediment going into the lake, have been installed by thousands of properties owners and hundreds of miles of roadways have been retrofitted for erosion control by public agencies. Still, TRPA and EIP partner agencies have more to do and core funding strategies that have underpinned the restoration so far are coming to a close.

TRPA's central role in part is to use the best scientific information to direct funding for the greatest environmental benefit, but we also need to persuade myriad funding sources it is worth investing in Tahoe's restoration and protection. While we've successfully secured funds in the past, there is a new fiscal reality today. Restoration has come from a mosaic of resources that reflects the broad importance of Lake Tahoe. Of the \$1.6 billion invested in the EIP from 1997 to 2011, 32 percent came from federal partners, 46 percent from the two states, and 22 percent from in-Basin agencies and private property owners. Lake Tahoe's spectacular environment supports a \$5 billion regional economy, so it has never been difficult to connect environmental investments to the prosperity of the region. What is changing today is the broader political and economic landscape in which public funding will be less reliable and in which a broader range of sources are needed and some new ones must be cultivated.

Rather than being daunted by the challenging funding climate, TRPA is inspired by new findings that show these investments are paying off. According to reports published by UC Davis, the decline of lake clarity has stabilized and in 2012 the average annual clarity measurement was the best it has been in 10 years. With more than 60 percent of TRPA's environmental targets in attainment or showing improvement, now is the time to push on, but progress depends on new and continued sources of funding.

Besides promising data on the restoration efforts, an updated Regional Plan is now in effect that is more supportive of public-private partnerships and encourages private investment in

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environmental gains. Under the Regional Plan, local government Area Plans are coming online that will make Tahoe's town centers more bikeable and walkable, new incentives are available for private restoration of sensitive land, and improvements in the permit process for homeowners will encourage environmental upgrades such as stormwater Best Management Practices (BMPs) to the Region's many older buildings.

TRPA is not leaving public funding stones unturned either. Our congressional leaders are actively working to reauthorize the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act which will help secure additional federal funding for the lake. There are state bond initiatives authorized or planned along with other possible appropriations.

However, support could increasingly come from crowd funding and private endowments such as the Tahoe Fund. The Tahoe Fund is a non-profit founded in 2010 to become a major source of private funding for environmental projects. The fundraising efforts have so far raised nearly \$1 million and supported key projects. The Tahoe Fund is also a prominent supporter of Lake Tahoe's greatest source of crowd funding—the Lake Tahoe license plate programs of both states. Simply by signing up for an attractive license plate, people in the furthest reaches of either state can become proud financial supporters of the EIP.

Regardless of the challenges that we face in the fight to save Lake Tahoe, the solutions cannot come from one source, one agency or one group. We all have a role to play and I encourage you to look for your opportunity to invest – if not your money, then yourself – in Lake Tahoe's continued restoration.

*Joanne S. Marchetta is the Executive Director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency*

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