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Lake Tahoe restoration remains crucial in light of climate change predictions

By Joanne Marchetta, TRPA Executive Director

Punctuating a year of important accomplishments in the restoration of Lake Tahoe was the recent study predicting climate change effects over the next hundred-plus years here. The study by UC Davis scientists and researchers paints a future picture of a lake environment unlike what we know today. The report predicts changes to our forest ecosystem, a reduction in the annual snowpack, and a possible end to the deep mixing of the lake's water that is so important to Lake Tahoe's health. The findings are an alarm bell ringing and they underscore the urgency to continue our collective restoration work.

But it is not all doom and gloom for Lake Tahoe's water quality, because early action is already underway. Many gains have been made this year with robust plans to continue. We are already beginning to address the needs of the initially adopted Total Maximum Daily Load. The TMDL pollutant reduction program is among the important scientific information we use to target where we invest ever more limited restoration dollars where they can make the most environmental difference. Using cutting-edge science, we focus stewardship for Tahoe's future.

In light of climate change forecasts, it is encouraging to look at early actions and other meaningful achievements like the TMDL being made to protect and restore our sensitive alpine environment. After all, it is the steady completion of individual projects that build up to momentous turning points.

Headlining restoration efforts this year was the Region-wide work to prevent new introduction and to control aquatic invasive species. Existing infestations of aquatic weeds were removed from 2.3 acres of the lake bottom and a groundbreaking project to demolish Asian clam populations treated a full acre of the Lake, setting the stage to move beyond the pilot-scale to a more comprehensive approach to Asian clam control.

12 Month Restoration Recap

Aquatic Invasive Species Control
- 2.3 acres of weed removal at 3 sites
- 1 acre of Asian clam treatment at 2 sites

Forest Fuel Reduction
- 22 projects completed
- 1,066 acres treated in community wildfire protection zones

Watershed Restoration*
- 15 miles of roadways treated for water quality
- 7 Erosion/stormwater projects completed
- 11 acres of environmentally-sensitive lands restored
- 1,434 acres of habitat restored
- 36,000 more Lahontan cutthroat trout stocked at Fallen Leaf Lake as monitoring confirms the population there is taking hold

Mitigation Passed Through TRPA
- 13 local restoration projects assisted with the mitigation money collected through permitted projects
- $1,000,000 of air and water quality mitigation funds distributed

Watercraft Inspections
- 18,000 check-ins (includes sealed vessels)
- 8,000 first-time inspections

* Some 12-month restoration numbers are based on the fiscal year rather than calendar year.

Successes are being driven by building the partnerships that are the cornerstone of TRPA's strategic vision. At the same time we are collaborating to knock back aquatic invasive species already here, a 40-strong partnership is installing the most aggressive program in the nation to keep other injurious species out. Through cooperation of boaters, private marinas, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and many others, TRPA and the Tahoe Resource Conservation District inspected more than 8,000 watercraft this year from outside the region to keep invasive species like Quagga mussel and New Zealand mudsnail from possibly destroying our world-renowned ecosystem.

On land, the pace of forest restoration and community wildfire protection work continued on high through 2010. Local fire protection districts and departments completed 22 projects creating more than 1,000 acres of community fuel breaks for our safety. We not only are adaptively managing our forests to turn back the problems built up over 100 years of unwittingly harmful practices, we are also preparing the region for a different forest makeup in the next 100. With these actions today, local fire agencies and the forest service are already planning for the predicted climate change effects to the forest ecosystem.

Rounding out restoration efforts over a 12-month period, long-planned Environmental Improvement Program (EIP) restoration projects retrofitted 15 miles of roadway for stormwater infiltration, retired 11 acres of sensitive land and restored more than 1,400 acres of important habitat area. Many more projects improving water and air quality were advanced this year by over $1 million in permit mitigation fund disbursements from TRPA to county and city agencies. These mitigation funds from project applicants pass directly through TRPA to provide the backbone for projects you see capturing stormwater runoff from our roadways.

As with years past, in 2010 we have made significant and steady gains toward environmental restoration. With the progress of past decades and the ongoing future restoration commitment, we are turning the corner on clarity loss at Lake Tahoe. Even with much more still to do, the investments being made by both the private and public sectors are paying off while laying crucial groundwork for an evolving environment and possible climate change effects.

Joanne Marchetta is Executive Director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. Visit www.trpa.org for more information.

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