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Partnerships Key to Addressing Imminent Threats

By Joanne Marchetta, TRPA Executive Director

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As we prepare a Regional Plan Update that will serve as a blueprint for the Lake Tahoe of the future, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency also is materially engaged in efforts to protect the Basin from imminent threats.

With boating and fire season in full swing, now is the time to focus our attention squarely on the threats of aquatic invasive species and catastrophic wildfire.

Staving off an aquatic invasion

Since January 2007 when quagga mussels were first discovered close by at Lake Mead, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency has led a Basin-wide effort to prevent such a destructive invasion from occurring here.

That is why we have one of the most aggressive boat inspection programs anywhere – and why the most up-to-date field survey shows the Lake is still mussel free.

These inspections combined with the Blue Boating inspection for potential air, water quality and noise impacts make it possible for us to enjoy the lake while protecting its pristine quality at the same time.

We know waiting in line for inspections is an inconvenience and boaters are concerned about fees. But it is because of the cooperation of the boating community that this effort has been successful. Tahoe boaters understand that we have no choice but to protect the lake, and that any fees collected are restricted and are used only to cover the cost of the inspection program, as required by TRPA code.

TRPA has published a Blue Boating guide and map that includes complete information on the inspections, boating safety and other boating issues. Free copies are available at visitor centers, marinas, and launch facilities.

While we work earnestly to ensure no new invaders enter the lake, we are also engaged with agency partners and the science community to help control and manage those harmful species already here. In fact, a large-scale Asian clam removal project launched this weekend that holds promising potential.

Ensuring fire safety

Unfortunately, the specter of an aquatic invasion is not the only imminent environmental threat we face in the Tahoe Basin. We are also involved in the ongoing effort to reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire.

Since June 2007 when an illegal campfire touched off the wind-fueled Angora Fire, scorching more than 3,000 acres and destroying 242 homes, TRPA has played an integral role in making it easier for residents to create defensible space around their

homes and to increase the amount of fuels reduction work within communities and open forestlands.

Two-thirds of the Lake Tahoe Basin was clear cut during the mid- to late 19th century to provide timber for the Virginia City silver mines during the Comstock era. Today, we still contend with the aftereffects of this environmental catastrophe and ensuing fire suppression. Cleared forests grew back as much as four times denser, overloading the Basin with heavy fire fuels. This became more complex in ensuing decades as heightened concern about water quality and erosion control gained emphasis in Tahoe.

Since the Angora Fire, TRPA, partner agencies and fire officials have streamlined and clarified practices to eliminate any confusion about how to integrate defensible space and erosion control work at residences. We have also stepped up public outreach efforts, streamlined permitting, and delivered more on-the-ground forest fuels reduction work.

Last year was a record-setting year in the Tahoe Basin, with 772 homeowners completing the Nevada Fire Safe Council's (NVFSC) defensible space program and receiving rebates for creating defensible space. Additionally, forest fuel reduction treatments were completed on more than 1,400 acres at Lake Tahoe by local fire crews and another 1,000 acres were being targeted. These projects are in addition to substantial fuel reduction on federal lands in the Basin. The next phase of the Environmental Improvement Program sets a target of treating 68,000 acres for fuels reduction by 2018.

A series of wildfire and fire safety awareness activities culminated in the Lake Tahoe Basin Wildfire Summit on July 9. And the "Get Defensive" public outreach campaign will continue to spread the word about this threat.

We won't stand for new invasive species at Lake Tahoe and our community and environment cannot afford another Angora fire. We owe our continued success in staving off these imminent threats to strong agency partnerships – but most of all to cooperation and support from the boating public and homeowners.

- Joanne Marchetta is Executive Director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency www.trpa.org

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