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Restoring Watershed Function Critical for Tahoe

**By Joanne Marchetta
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A bird's-eye view of the Upper Truckee River 200 years ago would have appeared much different than today. From the snow-encased headwaters in the mountains west of South Lake Tahoe to the wide, marshy mouth on the Lake Tahoe shore, the wild river found its own path. When flows were high, the river spilled over its banks and the meadows, marshes and streams were submerged. The marshy depths of seasonal ponds, the tall grasses, and the tree tops teemed with wildlife. After the spring melt, waters receded. Meadows of wildflowers unfolded before lush stands of forest. These natural processes filtered pollutants that otherwise would have entered the Lake. The Upper Truckee River is the largest tributary entering Lake Tahoe.

Years of gravel mining, grazing, logging, fire suppression and channelizing have altered the Upper Truckee significantly. It has been squeezed by urban development into a broken system. Along its banks are golf courses, an airport, bridges and roads. The waterway skips so quickly over the land now that once-abundant groundwater aquifers are rarely filled. At the mouth, marshes have been converted to a subdivision of waterfront homes. When flows are heavy, the river delivers a swirling plume of sediment to Lake Tahoe that is clearly visible from far overhead.

While the Upper Truckee River will never be restored to its pre-historic condition, ongoing restoration efforts on it and tributaries all around the Lake Tahoe Basin can and will significantly improve watershed function. At the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, in fact, we have completed more than 300 environmental improvement projects over the last 13 years related to water quality, scenic improvements, recreation, wildlife and fisheries and more. Currently, TRPA and its partner agencies have 15 new environmental improvement projects in the planning pipeline. Three of these projects are on the Upper Truckee. One restoration proposal would see improvements in the Washoe Meadows area where the California state parks system operates a popular golf course. Several holes could be moved away from the river banks as part of this proposal, which is currently under environmental review.

Two other restoration projects on the Upper Truckee are also at various stages of planning, as are restorations to benefit water quality and other natural values on Blackwood Creek and Ward Creek. We are also working on erosion control/water treatment projects in residential areas, bicycle trail projects, and forest fuel reduction projects. These projects are part of a broad effort that gained momentum in the mid-1990s to direct some \$1.4 billion in public and private investment toward environmental improvements in Tahoe. Over the next ten years, another \$2.5 billion in improvements will be sought as part of the next phase of the Environmental Improvement Program and the federal Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2009 now pending in Congress. TRPA actively works to secure these environmental monies for the benefit of the Basin.

Big numbers like these mean big improvements. Too often at Tahoe when we talk about environmental progress, we only hear about projects affecting our built environment. It is important to keep in mind that the environmental upgrades to our homes and roadways are progressing in concert with extraordinary work in our streams, meadows and forests.

All of these improvements taken together – to our natural systems as well as our town centers – are needed for positive results. Science shows us that we are turning a corner at Tahoe. Clarity loss has flattened and modeling tools have been developed to give us refined targets for reducing

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fine sediment and other pollutants with a goal of eventually returning lake clarity to its famous 100-foot mark.

The desired results of stream restoration go beyond water quality, however, and this is why it is important to support the Environmental Improvement Program (EIP) which funds so much restoration. Functioning streams and wetlands bring with them healthier and more natural vegetation and wildlife. As the rivers are slowed down, we see more frequent flooding of meadows during high flows, higher groundwater to recharge aquifers and a more productive food web for fisheries. Recreational values and natural aesthetics increase by leaps and bounds as well, which circles back to tourism, the health of our local economies and our quality of life. This clear linkage between Tahoe's environment and its economy is what connects the restoration of watershed function to the everyday lives of local residents and to Tahoe's national prominence as an unrivaled natural destination.

To live compatibly with Lake Tahoe requires that we fix the environmental mistakes of the past. To do so, we must join together and each do our part to improve water quality and to preserve and restore Tahoe's natural systems and aesthetics. This is a big part of what we are committed to at TRPA and we are highly optimistic about the intertwined futures of Lake Tahoe's ecosystem and the communities within it.

To learn more about watershed restoration projects and especially those in progress on the Upper Truckee River, visit our website, www.trpa.org, or contact us for more information.

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

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