

Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 25, 2006
RWB 06

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SCIENCE SHOWS IT IS POSSIBLE TO KEEP LAKE TAHOE BLUE

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE— A preview of the Lake Tahoe Clarity Model report due this fall shows reducing pollution by a finite amount will not only maintain Lake Tahoe's world-famous clarity, but even restore it to 1970 levels, the Lahontan Water Board announced today. Scientific modeling shows the lake's clarity can be restored by reducing pollution.

Despite Lake Tahoe's exceptional water quality, it is degraded compared to years within the memory of many people. When Frank Sinatra was making news around the lake, its clarity of about 100 feet was measured and set as a standard. As of 2004, the clarity measurement for the lake was only 74 feet, according the University of California, Davis, Tahoe Environmental Research Center.

The initial preview of the Clarity Model portrays various scenarios to achieve the desired clarity for Lake Tahoe. One such scenario demonstrates that if 35 percent of three types of pollution were eliminated, Tahoe's world-famous clarity could be restored to more than 100 feet. The pollutants are: nitrogen, phosphorus and fine sediment.

With the scientific questions settled, the community, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, a regulatory agency whose mandate is to preserve the Lake Tahoe environment, and the U.S. Forest Service, stewards of approximately 80% of the land in the Tahoe Basin, will be working with the water quality restoration team to answer public policy questions of how to move forward with the new information. Regulators and land use planners will be soliciting citizens' input. Pollutant reduction measures and policies will be incorporated into new 20-year plans for TRPA and the Forest Service.

"The Tahoe water quality restoration effort is one of the most robust scientific endeavors in United States," said Harold Singer, Executive Officer, Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board. "We're truly charting new territory in our quest to protect a national treasure. We, in collaboration with Nevada Division of Environmental Protection are using world-class science to inform regional public policy decisions."

“This science will serve as the backbone of our current efforts to update our 20-year regional plan for the Lake Tahoe Basin,” said John Singlaub, Executive Director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. “It’s exciting to have the knowledge that it’s possible to restore Lake Tahoe’s water clarity to historic levels within our lifetime. We’ll have many tough decisions to make about how to achieve the goal, but to know it’s scientifically possible is a breakthrough.”

The Lake Tahoe water quality restoration plan reflects the work of more than 150 professionals and scientists who have analyzed 30 years of data on the lake and its tributaries. These data have been folded into two scientific models: the watershed and the clarity models, which were undertaken by researchers with the UC Davis Tahoe Environmental Research Center, and Tetra-Tech, Inc. The watershed and clarity models document the sources of nitrogen, phosphorus, and fine sediments by category to allow the community and decision makers to make informed policies about the region’s future. The total load of pollutants into the lake has been categorized in four major sources: groundwater, stream channel erosion, air deposition, and upland sources such as urban and forestland runoff.

The large-scale, multi-million dollar scientific effort will determine the maximum amount of pollutants the lake can receive while meeting water quality standards. Using the science-based information, the Water Board will eventually establish a total maximum daily load (TMDL) to further protect Lake Tahoe.

The water quality restoration plan is part of Pathway 2007, a collaborative effort between public agencies at Lake Tahoe to chart a 20-year vision for the region. For more information about the TMDL, Pathway or the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, visit www.pathway2007.org, http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/lahontan/TMDL/Tahoe/Tahoe_Index.htm (water board web site), or www.trpa.org. To learn more about the Tahoe Clarity Model, visit: <http://terc.ucdavis.edu/>