

Lahontan board on road to allow chemicals in Lake Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

Milfoil is a problem weed that will be allowed to continue to flourish in 2011. But 2012 could be a different story.

On Wednesday night the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board heard a presentation on the Pesticide Basin Plan Amendment that would allow chemicals to be used on a limited basis in Lake Tahoe to eradicate aquatic invasive species.

The rules currently on the books are being violated because the water board knows vector control is spraying for mosquito abatement in the Lake Tahoe Basin. In the southern part of the state, which Lahontan has jurisdiction over, water purveyors are applying chemicals.



Milfoil has been a problem in Lake Tahoe since the 1980s.

Photo/TRCD

Bringing people into compliance is not the driving force behind creating the amendment, but a bonus.

The reason staff believes the amendment is needed is for

public health and safety, as well as ecological preservation. Environmental scientists Dan Sussman and Mary Fiore-Wagner made the presentation to the board at the April 13 meeting at Lake Tahoe Community College. (The two-day meeting resumes this morning at 8:30 at LTCC in South Lake Tahoe.)

“The long-term benefits to the environment outweigh the impacts of allowing some degradation to occur,” Fiore-Wagner said.

Ten people spoke during the public hearing – mostly in favor of using pesticides and herbicides. However, most were also from the Tahoe Keys area of South Lake Tahoe, which has had an issue with milfoil clogging the canals for decades.

The Keys contingent said the problem with mechanically getting rid of milfoil is that it keeps growing back – much like mowing a lawn. Plus, the invasive aquatic species grows in warm areas like the Keys (and Emerald Bay).

Jeff Pylman, Nevada County agricultural commissioner, said he liked staff’s proposed tiered approach to the process.

“A lot of pesticides have been so robust they rise to the level you need pesticides to eradicate them,” Pylman said.

The idea is not to universally allow the application of pesticides or herbicides in Lahontan’s jurisdiction, but instead put the applicant through a rigorous process to convince staff and the board that this alternative is the only way to get rid of the harmful species and that the long-term benefits outweigh living with the status quo.

The Tahoe Area Sierra Club and League to Save Lake Tahoe each wrote letters this week to Lahontan saying what a horrible idea the amendment is.

“The long-term impacts are unknown and the public benefit is unknown. This is an experiment with no limits,” the Sierra

Club wrote.

Neither group had a representative at the meeting.

Also in opposition, but who attended the meeting and spoke, was Madonna Dunbar, executive director of the Tahoe Water Suppliers Association.

Her group represents the entities around the lake that use Lake Tahoe as a drinking water source.

She pointed out that of the 160,000 water purveyors in the United States, 60 have received exemptions from the EPA saying they don't have to filter the water. Six of those are part of her group. Dunbar fears allowing chemicals into the lake will jeopardize that status.

Board Chairman Jack Clarke is sensitive to her concerns, but overall believes the amendment "is a step in the right direction."

Executive Director Harold Singer added, "We wouldn't want to do something and the EPA pulls the exemption."

Staff has time to investigate that issue. Another public hearing will be at the May 11 meeting in Victorville. People have until May 13 to comment on the amendment. More information about the amendment can be found online.

The Lahontan board is expected to vote on the amendment at the October meeting. If it's approved, it would go to the state board in March 2012, to the Office of Administrative Law the next month, and be before the EPA in June.