

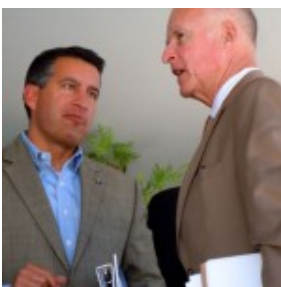
Lack of money not stopping desire, regulations to improve Lake Tahoe's famous clarity

By Kathryn Reed

HOMEWOOD – Money and cooperation were the overriding themes of the 15th annual Lake Tahoe Environmental Summit on Tuesday at Homewood Mountain Resort.

For the first time since then-President Bill Clinton started these summits, the governors of California and Nevada attended the event. But it was Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., who was the only speaker to have his speech interrupted by applause.

His desire to turn a greater amount of the regulatory control in the Lake Tahoe Basin over to the five counties and one city was met with strong approval by the few hundred people in attendance.



Govs. Brian Sandoval and Jerry Brown pledge to work together on Lake Tahoe issues.

Photos/Kathryn

Reed

Heller and others spoke of the need for TRPA's Regional Plan to meet its latest deadline of December 2012 for approval by the Governing Board.

A meeting on Monday between Govs. Jerry Brown and Brian Sandoval sparked a mutual desire to travel to each others respective capitals to further the dialog about Nevada Senate Bill 271 and getting the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency to function better.

(Sandoval and Heller are former TRPA board members.)

"We need a road map and certainty about what is going to happen at this lake," Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., said in reference to the need for the Regional Plan update's completion.

Eye on sediment

While much was made of the need to reduce fine sediment from reaching the lake, the irony is all those people listening to the politicians on stage were sitting in fine sediment, stirring it up as they walked on the lower ski slope – which is on the other side of Highway 89 directly across from the very waters they are trying to protect.

At the summit, Brown and Sandoval, with Jared Blumenfeld, administrator for the EPA's Pacific Southwest Region, signed the Total Maximum Daily Load document, which has a goal to substantially improve lake clarity.

The federally mandated and unfunded program says that in 65 years the white dinner plate-looking Secchi disc will be visible to a depth of 100 feet. Right now it can be seen at 64.4 feet.

In this year that saw the lake rise 3 feet from runoff, it declined in clarity by the same amount.

On the California side it's Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board that oversees the TMDL, while it's the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection on the other side of the lake.

"Ten years ago people thought Lake Tahoe's loss of blue was because of algae. It's about 25 percent of the problem," Blumenfeld said. "The rest of the problem is sediment. Science has given us a road map. I like to call it a diet for Lake Tahoe."

While Sandoval singled out the Sierra Colina project in Stateline being an example of a private entity working on eliminating 74 tons of sediment from reaching the lake each year via the project in and around Burke Creek, he skirted around the greater problem with that project in that it is held up in litigation.

Brown said, "The lake stands as a microcosm of the larger issues we face."

He said it's time builders and environmentalists get together to find a way to sustain the region economically and environmentally.

Where's the money?

The problem is no one had definitive answers how to pay for that diet of reducing fine sediment reaching Lake Tahoe. Everyone talked about a greater need for cooperation, for there to be less reliance on the federal government, and a greater need for private entities to step forward.

One source of money will be the Tahoe Fund. A Monday night fundraising dinner brought in \$200,000. While it's a start, it's a drop in the bucket – especially when one considers it

costs nearly \$2 million to build one mile of bike trail in the basin. And these trails are viewed as a means to reduce sediment by getting cars off the road.

Another \$34 million from Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act money has been allocated for Lake Tahoe. But that source is also drying up.

While \$1.5 billion has been spent in the last 10 years on projects designed to improve lake clarity, where the money will come from in the future is an unknown.

The Lake Tahoe Restoration Act has not be reauthorized, though Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., is confident it will pass. He was confident last year, too, and Congress didn't give the green light.

"We need to adapt to a new fiscal reality," Feinstein said.

While that is true, no one is openly speaking about adapting to a possible new reality if Lake Tahoe's clarity doesn't improve and what that means for the eco-system as well as economy via tourists not wanting to see another brown lake.

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