

TRPA: Amphibious tourist mobile not hurting lake clarity

By Anne Knowles

If you're wondering if you saw a white boat with wheels drive off Highway 50 into Lake Tahoe sometime this summer, you did. And if you're wondering if it's legal, it is.

Tahoe Duck Tours, in its first full summer of operations, is offering daily, multiple hour-plus tours of the lake on its amphibious vehicles it calls ducks. The World War II-era boats feature six wheels, a watertight hull, a propeller and a canopy-covered deck that seats 24.

Several times a day, the ducks pick up passengers at Heavenly Village near Stateline and travel the five miles via 50 and Tahoe Keys Boulevard to the Tahoe Keys Marina where they enter the water. An hour and 20 minutes later, they emerge and make the five-mile trek back, but not before being cleaned of milfoil, an invasive weed found in the lake.



A duck boat driver/captain was cleaning underneath the vehicle/boat Aug. 18 at the

Tahoe Keys
Marina parking
lot before
hopping
aboard.
Photo/Kathryn
Reed

“We take a lot of plant material off,” said Shawn Kearney, owner of Tahoe Duck Tours in South Lake Tahoe. “The boat gets dirtier than we get the lake.”

Each vehicle is cleaned of road sediment once a day, in the morning before the first trip. And they take additional care on the boats’ exteriors.

“We use food-grade oil, the same used on meat slicers, for anything that comes in contact with the water,” Kearney said. “It is non-toxic.”

The ducks are permitted by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency as well as regulated by the U.S. Coast Guard and the California Highway Patrol.

The TRPA permit is a two-year, commercial boating permit issued to Swimming Truck LLC – aka Tahoe Duck Boats – issued July 29, 2010. It limits the boats to five trips a day per boat, seven days a week, in July and August, and to no more than three trips a day per vehicle three days a week in April, May, June, September and October. Tahoe Duck Tours paid an \$868.80 air quality mitigation fee and a \$1,000 monitoring fee.

The boats can launch only from Tahoe Keys Marina and pick up customers at the Stateline Transit Center, adjacent to Heavenly Village, and cannot enter any other body of water without additional review and approval from the TRPA. An additional memorandum of understating prohibits the boats from

going into other waters even when not operating as a business in order to prevent invasive weeds and species located elsewhere from entering Lake Tahoe.

The permit also requires the daily cleaning and maintenance and the removal of all aquatic vegetation prior to entering and exiting the lake, and says the boats are subject to random inspections.

“As part of the permitting process they completed an environmental check list and we did not identify any impacts,” said Ken Kasman, shorezone coordinator for the TRPA, who was involved in issuing Tahoe Duck Boats permit.

The daily cleaning, said Kasman, involves washing the entire vehicle including the undercarriage, vacuuming the entire system including the bilge pump and applying a degreaser.

“They have spent considerable time cleaning the vehicles and making sure there is no loose grease,” he said.

Kasman also said the boats launch from one of the busiest marinas at the lake, where trailers for other boats haul in fine sediment as well.

“It’s unfair to specifically call these guys out,” Kasman said. “They’re not creating any significant impact.”

The boat operator is an “excellent partner in fighting the spread of aquatic invasive species in Lake Tahoe,” according to Ted Thayer, TRPA’s aquatic invasive species program manager. In addition to cleaning the boat of milfoil, which is mandatory, and using vegetable oil on the boat, which is not, Tahoe Duck Boats makes TRPA educational material on invasive species available and educates passengers about the issue during the ride, said Thayer.

“They have been very good partners and stewards of the lake,” Thayer said in an email to *Lake Tahoe News*.

Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board has no jurisdiction over the boats.

“We don’t regulate boats, but we do regulate the marinas,” said Lauri Kemper, assistant executive officer at the California agency. “The marinas are obligated to report to us.”

Kemper said she has received no complaints, either officially or anecdotally from the public, about the boats.

The boats have been nearly full all summer and hired for a couple additional private parties, said Kearney, but business has slowed down in the last week. The boats currently run Monday through Friday at 11am, 1pm and 3pm, and Saturday and Sunday hourly from 11am to 4pm. After Labor Day, the schedule will be reduced to Wednesday through Sunday, three times a day, until the end of September.

Tickets are \$30 for adults, \$27 for seniors and active duty personnel, \$19 for children older than 3, and \$8 for children under 3 years old.