

Upper Truckee River scenic designation hits snag

By Kathryn Reed

It's more about the fishing experience than anything else. That was the message delivered by proponents Tuesday to the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors during a lengthy discussion about whether the Upper Truckee River – the Meiss Meadow area in particular – should have the designation of National Wild and Scenic River.

Meeting in South Lake Tahoe for their once a year venture from Placerville, the five electeds tend to have a Tahoe-centric agenda on these days. Oct. 11 was no different.

However, at the end of the day only Supervisors Norma Santiago and Ray Nutting thought going on a tour of the new facilities at South Tahoe High School was worth their time.



A Lahontan cutthroat trout near Meiss Meadow. Photo/Dick White

But the five did work through the normal lunch hour to come to the conclusion more information is needed before a vote on the river designation will be taken. However, no date was given

when it might resurface. It was already continued from September. The Oct. 11 continuance was done on a 4-1 vote, with Supervisor Jack Sweeney ready to vote no on the whole notion of the designation.

Meiss Meadow is where the Upper Truckee River begins. At 21.4 miles, it is the largest tributary to Lake Tahoe.

One thing that makes the area above the falls unique is this is where Lahontan cutthroat trout prosper.

While Jenny Hatch with CalTrout and David Lass with Trout Unlimited told the supervisors the Upper Truckee River is the only stream-based population of this fish, the U.S. Fish and Wild Service's website says otherwise.

It's 7.3 miles of the river that would be part of the larger 32 miles that would potentially receive the federal scenic designation. Included in the area are Round, Dardanelles, Showers, and Meiss Lakes, and other creeks in the watershed.

The U.S. Forest Service, which owns the land in El Dorado and Alpine counties that is being discussed, in 1999 determined the area met the criteria to be part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. However, it takes an act of Congress for the designation to become a reality.

It would also take an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement to be done before it's a done deal.

The Forest Service has done its part. Now it's up to another entity to carry the torch, so to speak, to get Congress to act. The two trout groups want to be the torchbearers, but need the backing of a public agency like the Board of Supervisors to have the clout. Thus the reason for the hearing.

"We manage the area as though that designation has come

through,” Nancy Gibson, Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit forest supervisor, told the board.

After the discussion, Santiago told *Lake Tahoe News*, “The protections are temporary at best (for the area). Someone could say, ‘Let’s dam up the river.’”

While that is not likely to happen, with the LTBMU this winter set to release its updated Forest Plan for a 90-day review, it’s possible what is adopted could change how the Meiss Meadow area and Upper Truckee River are managed.

Four residents spoke at the meeting, with three against the designation.

Santiago, in the same post-discussion conversation with *LTN*, said she has more constituents than just those three who spoke.

Sue Novasel, who has a house on the river, is appalled the first she heard of the issue was at the meeting. She has experienced two fish kills on the river that no longer allow ample fishing from her back yard.

“I think less regulation is better,” Novasel told the supervisors.

Shirley Taylor, whose family once ranched a large part of the acreage being talked about, is dead-set against the proposal. She went to the September Alpine County Board of Supervisors meeting to speak her piece. The body agreed to send their El Dorado County colleagues and CalTrout a letter not supporting the scenic designation.

The trout enthusiasts believe the designation would mean being able to attract more people to the area just for the thrill of reeling in the rare Lahontan cutthroat trout. The opportunity exists today as well. The scenic designation would ensure the area is kept as is for future generations.