

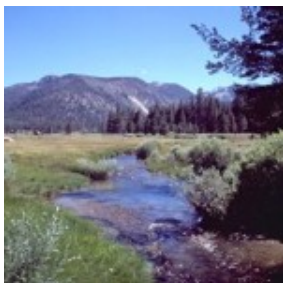
Efforts under way to forever save Lahontan cutthroat trout

By Kathryn Reed

Catching five species of trout in a day is an incredible experience for an angler. Just ask Victor Babbitt.

Babbitt, who owns Tahoe Fly Fishing Outfitters in South Lake Tahoe, was at the Feb. 21 open house where people could learn about the proposal to turn 32 miles of the Upper Truckee River and its tributaries into a federally recognized wild and scenic area.

“I don’t think there is a negative side,” Babbitt told *Lake Tahoe News*. “When my kids are my age I want them to have a place to go to for sure.”



Organizations want this area of the Lake Tahoe Basin classified as wild and scenic.

Trout Unlimited and California Trout hosted two open houses this week to inform the public about their desire to seek Wild and Scenic River Designation for the Upper Truckee River through Meiss Meadows. The Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit

and Pacific Southwest Region of the U.S. Forest Service recommended this in a 1990 management plan and subsequent 1999 report.

But it takes an act of Congress to get the designation. That is what the groups are seeking.

It's the Lahontan cutthroat trout that makes this area so special. They are listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act. And this area of the Lake Tahoe Basin is one of the few places to find them.

Catch and release is the rule with a single-fly barbless lure. And then fishing is only allowed in the summer months.

Trout Unlimited and CalTrout at a minimum want 7.3 miles of the Upper Truckee River to receive the federal designation. But they believe expanding that to 32 miles to include the area around Round, Dardanelles, Showers, and Meiss lakes, and other creeks in the watershed would be better for the fish and ecosystem.

The designation usually means a quarter mile area on either side of the waterway is protected as well.

Jenny Hatch with CalTrout said, "It's really about keeping it the way it is."

Hatch said the desire for the larger area is because the fish population is growing and this will ensure what her group considers proper management of the natural resources.

While the Forest Service basically manages the area today as though the designation is in place, without it, the federal agency can change its protocol.

Dave Lass with Trout Unlimited said the cost to create a management plan if the designation goes through was estimated to be less than \$50,000 in 1999 when the last Forest Service report came out.

He believes groups like his and others could work with the Forest Service to create a public-private partnership so dollars are not diverted from local resources.

Lass foresees meadow restoration, removing conifer encroachment, improving mountain bike trails, and putting in signage as projects that could occur.

"It's not building roads or more trails. You will still have to sweat to get in there," Lass told *Lake Tahoe News*.

At the Wild and Scenic Film Festival on March 9 in Stateline a short film about the subject will be aired.

It's definitely possible this area, which is most easily accessed off Luther Pass, could see more visitors. Right now the number of visitors is not limited in terms of day hikers, fishermen or backpackers.

The Merced River has a wild and scenic designation that is impacting the number of visitors to Yosemite National Park and might have a ripple affect to all national parks.

The designation could also open commercial guide service to the area. This is something Babbitt did in this location about a dozen years ago, but has been unable to get a permit from the Forest Service since then.

No one from the Forest Service filtered into the Feb. 21 open house while *Lake Tahoe News* was there. The second meeting was Feb. 22 in Markleeville.

While support from supervisors in Alpine and El Dorado counties is not necessary to go forward, officials with the conservation groups recognize it would help their cause to have it. No date has been set when those boards will discuss the issue again. October was the last time the county officials discussed the designation at a public meeting.

Hatch said she would like the issue to be part of the annual

environmental summit in August, including tours of the area.

The goal of the trout groups is to have the designation in two years.

For more information or to make a comment, email dlass@tu.org.