

Lake Tahoe Basin lacks policy about beavers

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No one is counting the beavers in the Lake Tahoe Basin. No one knows if the population is growing, decreasing or has stayed stagnant through the decades. No one is even managing them.

But anyone who wants to touch the beavers' habitat or potentially do anything to the water they are building dams in, well, there are plenty of agencies to take your money, delay your desires and bog down the process with paperwork.

While the meeting on April 19 hosted by the Lahontan Water Quality Control Board in South Lake Tahoe was civil, the message was – don't mess with beaver habitat without first asking. Who to ask, well, that is a bit murky. The overriding response: Start with Lahontan.



Beavers create dams like this one in Taylor Creek which then prevent the free flow of water. Photo/LTN file

It was also abundantly clear that the officials – U.S. Forest Service, Lahontan, California Department of Fish and Wildlife,

Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and U.S. Army Corp of Engineers – are not all on the same page as to what people should do, what the most effective means of dealing with problematic beavers is, and what can be done.

Data about beavers along the Upper Truckee River go back to the 1970s, Sarah Muskopf with the USFS said. But she didn't provide any of that data.

“Regarding specific policies (for beavers), we don't have any,” she said.

Muskopf said the Forest Service mostly cares about beavers in terms of public safety and infrastructure.

Sue Novasel, who has lived on the shores of the river for decades, said she has noticed a lot more beaver activity lately.

“I don't want these beautiful animals harmed. I want more education,” she told the group.

Shelly Blair with Fish and Wildlife said, “We don't have a formal outreach program.”

The Sierra Wildlife Coalition was in the audience and provided advice the panel didn't have. Abrasive paint the color of a particular tree can thwart beavers from chewing it down. Sometimes wire-mesh fencing works. Removing dams is a short-term fix. Installing flow devices can get the water moving.

But those devices might require a permit from one or more of the agencies at the meeting – and maybe others.

It was pointed out it's easier to get a permit to kill a beaver than it is to get a permit to extract a dam or put in a device that would alter the flow of the waterway. Blair with Fish and Wildlife agreed, but said all she can do is follow the law.

Edwin James with the Carson Water Subconservancy District was one of nearly 40 people at the Friday meeting. He lamented that maybe he should not have attended the discussion because now he knows he's supposed to have a permit to remove a dam.

What he took issue with is that a dam could be discovered one day, needs to be taken out immediately, but permitting could take months. The water he is dealing with is going to farmers and ranchers in the Carson Valley. (Lahontan has jurisdiction there.)

Alan Miller with Lahontan said it's possible a more general permit could be issued from his agency instead of needing one for each dam. No time line was provided.

Patrick Stone, senior wildlife and fisheries biologist with TRPA, admitted the fastest a permit would be issued is three months, but it's likely an 18-month process.

The cows would have died of thirst by then, so it's good cattle don't graze in the basin any more.

Kris Hansen with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said her agency is looking into regional permits regarding beavers, but none would be available this summer.

Several people at the meeting wanted solutions for how to deal with beavers – something other than killing them.

Brendan Ferry with the El Dorado County Department of Transportation said beavers caused problems after his agency restored part of Angora Creek.

"We were forced into killing it. A lot of us in the office didn't want to go that way. But we felt we had to," Ferry said.

Blair with the state said relocation is not an option because of "biological reasons."

TRPA's Stone said putting a beaver in another habitat would be like dropping one of the people in the room in the middle of China. (This reporter has been to China, did fine, came back to the U.S. healthy, and still doesn't understand his analogy.)

Stone said there is evidence beavers were native to the basin, were trapped to the point of not existing, and then intentionally re-introduced.