

Forest Service explains river restoration work



Sue Norman and Stephanie Heller with the U.S. Forest Service talk in front of the new channel of the Upper Truckee River. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

Not everyone is buying what the U.S. Forest Service is selling.

What the feds are selling is that changing how the Upper Truckee River flows is a good thing. What many on a tour of the project weren't buying is whether this four-year \$4 million project is needed.

Seventeen people on Aug. 2 meandered through the meadow on the other side of Lake Tahoe Airport looking at the work that is under way and how the current river flows.

“How do they know it will be what they say?” Louise Wigart said to *Lake Tahoe News*.

The Forest Service points to High Meadow and Cookhouse Meadow as being successful restoration projects.

Wigart’s husband, Corky, called it “overkill.” He’s been canoeing, fishing and hiking on and along the river for decades and sees no need to create a new channel. If something needs to be fixed, fix the existing channel is his philosophy.

But that strategy isn’t being used on any section of the river. Instead, the respective owners are each gradually rerouting the river in an attempt to restore the meander to what it was before humans changed it decades ago. Officials say working in the existing river is cost-prohibitive and would lead to greater degradation of lake clarity.

The goal is to put more curves in the river. Some sections had been straightened during grazing, logging and quarry operations. Curves will slow down the rate at which the water travels. This in turn is designed to lessen the erosion on the banks.

The Upper Truckee River, according to scientists, is the No. 1 contributor of fine sediment to Lake Tahoe. That sediment is what the same scientists claim contributes to the decline of lake clarity.

While this project is about keeping the lake clear, that is not the primary goal.

“This is mostly an ecosystem project,” Stephanie Heller with the U.S. Forest Service told those on the Friday tour. She said raising the water table and providing more habitat are critical components of the project.

The channel today is deep. The eroding banks impossible to miss. The meadow bone dry.

And while the meadow may be dry in August in the future, that will not be the case in early summer. The new channel is being designed so it will be shallower, flow at about one-fourth the rate of the current channel, all with the expectation it will flood the meadow two out every three years.

Some people along the tour questioned whether the project is going to really have an impact on lake clarity.

It is the overall reduction of sediment that is measured, not individual reaches.

There will be another tour of the project on Oct. 25.