

It takes billions of dollars to preserve and improve Lake Tahoe's environment



Tahoe City's Lakeside Trail is decorative, has interpretive signs, seats and endless views of Lake Tahoe. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

TAHOE CITY – A catastrophic inferno like the Rim Fire could wipe out the more than \$1.4 billion worth of improvements that have been made to Lake Tahoe through the Environmental Improvement Program.

That was the warning Julie Regan, external affairs chief with the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, issued Oct. 18.

While 50,000 acres in the Lake Tahoe Basin have received a

fuels treatment – or thinning – to make them more fire safe, many have never been touched.

“We can choose our fire. It’s a matter of will and funding,” Mike Vollmer, TRPA forest fuels manager, said.

The TRPA officials along with others were speaking during a tour of a handful of the more than 400 EIP projects that have been completed in the last 15 years. The EIP was created out of the inaugural environmental summit in 1997.

Having trees be spaced out, branches not dangling on the ground and brush removed can help prevent a canopy fire. A goal of thinning is to create terrain that would keep fire on the ground.

Vollmer said a healthy forest has between 90 and 100 trees per acre, whereas there are places now in the basin with 400 trees per acre.

But all of this thinning takes money and that is practically an endangered species these days. If the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act is reauthorized, it calls for \$135 million going to fuels reduction projects.



Blackwood Creek near Lake Tahoe was restored by the California Tahoe Conservancy, while the U.S.

Forest Service fixed the upper watershed.

Money is an issue with most of the improvements.

It cost \$12 million to build one mile of trail along the lakefront in Tahoe City.

It's considered an economic benefit considering more than 400,000 people use it each year. Known as the Lakeside Trail, it's a definite showcase as the entire lake is visible, with snow on the higher elevations and aspens at lake level. A play area is being used, cyclists are out, and pedestrians are brushing past.

Kelli Twomey, with Tahoe City Public Utility District – the lead agency on the trail project, and Wally Auerbach with Auerbach Engineering spoke of the collaboration needed to get the trail built, how it was a redevelopment project, and that besides recreation it brought water quality and other improvements to the area.

Keeping fine sediment out of the lake is a major component of most environmental improvement projects. Stuart Roll with the California Tahoe Conservancy pointed out how the 54-acre Blackwood Creek project is an example of how restoration of a channel can reduce dirt from clouding Lake Tahoe.

This area has been logged twice and had a quarry in the creek. Banks were steep, the forest was so thick the aspen stand couldn't thrive, and a user-created trail to Eagle Rock was steep. Now the channel meanders more naturally, sediment reaching the lake has been dramatically reduced, aspens are in full bloom, and a new trail to Eagle Rock has been established.



Milfoil near the dam in Tahoe City.

The federal government shutdown prevented the milfoil removal project by the Tahoe City dam from starting, so it will be delayed until next year.

The plan is to put black tarps on the invasive weed to kill it.

There is so much milfoil that it almost covers the width of the channel near the dam. The weed comes from Lake Tahoe and is making its way down the Truckee River. (It's also going up the Upper Truckee River.)

Tahoe Keys on the South Shore is the largest area with milfoil. Boats distribute it to the rest of the lake via propellers. It's possible one day herbicides could be applied to kill the milfoil.

But it was pointed out that it's near impossible to eradicate any of the aquatic invasive species. It's all about controlling them.