

NDOW wants Incline Lake filled

By AP

With the U.S. Forest Service seemingly on course to keep empty a scenic mountain lake acquired years ago for the public for more than \$43 million, state wildlife officials continue to press the argument the lake should be refilled and established as a fishing destination.

Incline Lake, officials with the Nevada Department of Wildlife insist, could be turned into a valuable fishery for Lahontan cutthroat trout, providing an important recreational opportunity for the public while furthering goals to restore the threatened fish.

“We think there’s an opportunity there,” Jon Sjoberg, chief of fisheries for the Department of Wildlife, told the Reno Gazette-Journal.



Ponds are naturally forming where Incline Lake used to be. Photo/Matt Dickinson

Once a private enclave for Nevada’s rich and famous, Incline Lake and 777 acres of surrounding land was acquired by the Forest Service in 2008 in a deal that ultimately paid its

former owner, the Incline Lake Corp., \$43.5 million. Supporters of the deal at the time touted the lake's recreational as well as its environmental values.

But in 2009, Incline Lake Corp. drained the lake after experts determined its dam, now 72 years old, could fail during an earthquake and flood portions of nearby Incline Village. The lake has remained drained ever since as Forest Service officials worked to decide its future.

Early this month, the Forest Service closed the public comment period on an environmental assessment examining various options regarding future management of the Incline Lake property. While one alternative would reconstruct the dam and potentially allow the return of a lake there, the proposed action would remove the dam and restore the area to wetland meadows.

If that's indeed the direction the government goes, it might be an unfortunate one, Sjoberg said.

"It could be a lost opportunity," Sjoberg said. "It is their decision, ultimately."

Last July, after the Forest Service released a management proposal to remove the dams and restore the 777 acres, Department of Wildlife supervisory habitat biologist Mark Freese wrote a letter to Nancy Gibson, supervisor of the service's Tahoe unit, urging a reconsideration.

"We encourage the Forest Service to consider repairing the dam and spillway to bring it up to code so that public safety and water quality protection are in place," Freese wrote. "Given its beautiful alpine setting and proximity to urban areas, we feel that this reservoir could be an extremely popular recreational area and sport fishery given the opportunity to develop it."

Specifically, Freese proposed filling the lake so it could be

used as a sport fishery for Lahontan cutthroat trout, Nevada's state fish and categorized as a threatened species.

"The location and accessibility of Incline Lake offers a unique opportunity to showcase and educate the public about native sport fisheries in Nevada by providing what would be one of the few lakes across its range where people could have the opportunity to fish for native LCT (Lahontan cutthroat trout)," Freese wrote. "There is also the potential that this reservoir could facilitate recovery efforts and management of LCT throughout the region."

The Department of Wildlife continues to stand by the position advocated in the July letter, Sjoberg said.

"We're looking at an opportunity to use Lahontan cutthroat trout for recreational fishing and to build more support for moving forward with recovery (of cutthroat)," Sjoberg said.

When money was secured to buy the property in 2008, \$5 million was set aside to repair the dam. That money remains available. In his July letter, Freese wrote of the possibility the Department of Wildlife could act as a partner in restoring the dam and lake, including through possible provision of additional funding.