

Hot tub draining not a simple topic in Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

When hot tubs are purchased and installed in the Lake Tahoe Basin no one explains where the water is supposed to go when it comes time to draining them – at least not for residents.

For commercial hot tubs and pools, the rules are more defined.

“Commercial hot tubs and pools are connected to the sewer and they pay a fee for that,” Ross Johnson, manager of plant operations for South Tahoe Public Utility District, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “For residential hot tubs I tell them to do the thing I always do which is irrigate your yard with the hot tub water.”



Draining hot tubs can pose problems in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Photo/LTN

Draining hot tubs is getting attention lately because just this week property owners on Wildwood Avenue in South Lake Tahoe let the water from their spa go down an embankment. This presents erosion concerns because ultimately the dirt that wound up in the street is likely to reach Lake Tahoe. And it is sediment that is the No. 1 cause of declining lake clarity.

A neighbor notified the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and other entities.

“It’s illegal to discharge chlorinated water into the city storm drains,” Jason Burke, stormwater program coordinator for South Lake Tahoe, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

In June, Lake Tahoe Vacation Resort notified Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board that its pool water was put down a storm drain.

While the resort admitted this, the city is contemplating what to do based on not having evidence of the infraction occurring. Burke said the city is working with TRPA on potential penalties for the hotel property.

Julie Regan with TRPA said their investigation is ongoing with the resort because the chlorinated water was also discharged into a stream environmental zone. This is never allowed.

Three people from the South Lake Tahoe hotel are no longer employed there because of this incident.

All the agencies agree commercial properties in the basin must tie their tubs and pools into a sewer line. These hot tubs are also a different grade than a residential one because they have stronger pumps and must have two drains.

TRPA in its best management practices handbook has a section addressing pools and hot tubs. The major concerns are if the chemicals in the water would harm animals or reach a water body, whether it’s a creek or Lake Tahoe.

“We are not enforcing how they empty personal hot tubs,” Regan told *Lake Tahoe News*. But doing so over grass or rocks so it does not create an erosion problem is highly encouraged.

A private hot tub can contain between 200 and 600 gallons of water.

Allen Miller with Lahontan said his agency doesn't have a problem with residential units draining tubs for irrigation purposes.

"To use it to irrigate seems like a pretty good option, especially in drought conditions," Burke said. "The only thing people should be careful is to not create erosion problems with all that water."

He recommends letting a chlorinated tub sit without replenishing chemicals for a week or using dechlorination tablets before draining.

South Tahoe PUD doesn't want private hot tub owners to start using the sewer system for multiple reasons. For one, it costs money to treat that water. Added costs to the district would eventually mean higher sewer bills.

Another concern is if people don't know what they are doing, the sewer line can get contaminated with dirt or sewage could flow the other way.

While residents are not draining their hot tubs all that often, vacation rentals in some jurisdictions are supposed to in between each new rental. Those are not considered commercial tubs even though it is a business operation taking place.

Calls to vacation rental and spa businesses were not returned.

None of the agencies is addressing whether the gray water violates the Porter Cologne Water Quality Control Act. That federal law is what mandates all the treated sewer water in the basin must be exported. People in the Lake Tahoe Basin aren't even supposed to collect water from a shower and use that for irrigation – even though that is a common drought busting tool.

