

Opinion: Feds have obligation to protect Tahoe

By Steve Teshara and Darcie Goodman Collins

Decisions made in Congress over the next few months may well determine the extent to which Lake Tahoe remains blue and clear, with healthy forests, resilient watersheds, and its ecology protected from the threat of new aquatic invasive species.

For two decades, the Lake Tahoe environmental improvement program (EIP) has provided guidance for the shared investments made by our federal, state and local governments, homeowners, and businesses to restore and protect Tahoe's unique environmental qualities and enhance its diverse public recreation opportunities.

As the 2015 Lake Tahoe Environmental Summit nears, two bills are pending in Congress to continue the federal government's investments at the lake. One of them, Senate Bill 1724, continues the comprehensive and collaborative approach needed to address the traditional as well as new challenges that face our national treasure. The other bill is HR3382 in the House of Representatives. We are concerned that, if passed as written, HR3382 would mark a major retreat for the federal government's long history of leadership and investments at Tahoe.

Starting in 2000, the first Lake Tahoe Restoration Act authorized the federal share of funding for many of Tahoe's highest priority projects identified by the EIP. Even before that legislation expired in 2010, Tahoe stakeholders and EIP advocates began working to secure reauthorization. SB1724 reflects years of input from a diverse array of stakeholders. It is the comprehensive approach essential to build on the

foundation of prior Tahoe investments by all EIP partners. We strongly encourage everyone who cares about Lake Tahoe to actively support the federal leadership and investments detailed in SB1724.

The Senate bill is bipartisan legislation introduced July 9 by Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev. It is co-sponsored by Sens. Harry Reid, D-Nev., Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif.) and Barbara Boxer, D-Calif. HR3382 was drafted and introduced by Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Garden Valley, on July 29.

The Senate bill authorizes up to \$415 million over 10 years to improve forest health, reduce the risk of wildfire, combat harmful aquatic invasive species, and restore Tahoe's famed water clarity, including efforts directed at threats to the Lake's nearshore water quality. HR3382 authorizes less than half the programs in SB1724 and at a much lower amount, totaling \$60 million over 10 years. That is far less than the 10-year commitments of Nevada and California, and far less than the \$216 million invested by private property owners and businesses during the first 10 years of the EIP from 1997-2006. As written, the scope of HR3382 is not well matched with the fact that the federal government owns and manages over 78 percent of the land within the Tahoe basin and has responsibilities commensurate with its large and significant ownership.

Since 1997, all partners in the EIP, including the federal government, have made tangible, measurable progress with investments that together maximize the value of each. Properly funded, the EIP will continue to support environmental restoration, recreational enhancements, and our region's nearly \$5 billion annual economy. But new threats loom and much work remains to be done. Collectively, we must build on the investments and progress we have made, rather than scale back now.

We commend the members of our Senate delegation for their

understanding, leadership, and commitment to reflect input from constituents. We respectfully encourage House members to take this same approach. This could be done through amendments to HR3382. One example would be adding the authorization for a continued federal share of funding for water quality projects consistent with federal and state law.

Our hope is that a single, comprehensive, and properly funded bill will emerge from the legislative process. The federal government is our largest landowner. It needs to remain a leader and full partner in protecting and valuing Lake Tahoe for this and many future generations.

Steve Teshara is principal of Sustainable Community Advocates. Darcie Goodman Collins is executive director of the League to Save Lake Tahoe.