

Political differences could peak at Tahoe summit

By Michael Doyle, McClatchy Washington Bureau

The lawmakers convening Monday for a major Lake Tahoe conference confront a Capitol Hill conflict over how best to protect the much-beloved mountain region.

They differ over money, environmental laws, timber harvesting and more. For years, the unresolved differences have sunk efforts to renew the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act, first passed in 2000. Some hope this summit can help members of Congress finally start paddling in the same direction.

“I think the prospects are good,” Rep. John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove, said Friday.

Competing sides will certainly be present at the 19th annual Lake Tahoe Summit at the Round Hill Pines Beach Resort. Governors, senators and congressmen from California and Nevada will attend, along with about 500 others, paying homage to the 191-square mile lake.

The federal legislators share some common ground, underscored by identical language in House and Senate bills that praise Tahoe as “one of the largest, deepest, and clearest freshwater lakes in the world.” The two bills share a name: the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2015.

Both bills are also cast as a follow-up to the original Lake Tahoe Restoration Act, which expired in 2010. That measure authorized \$300 million in federal funds, which supported hundreds of specific Tahoe-related projects.

But in ways large and small, the bipartisan Senate version introduced July 9 and the House version introduced several

weeks later by Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Garden Valley, veer dramatically.

The Senate bill covers more territory, costs more money and is in its ambitions closer to the original Lake Tahoe Restoration Act. It authorizes spending \$415 million over 10 years on various Tahoe-related projects.

The House bill is more tightly focused on forest fuel reduction and invasive species, and it's designed to pass muster with congressional conservatives. Added up, it authorizes only about one-fifth the amount of money provided by the Senate bill.

"For the last eight years, Tahoe legislation has been introduced in the Senate and has not moved off the Senate floor," McClintock said when he offered his package. "We have carefully crafted this bill to fit within the budget parameters set by Congress."

McClintock's chairmanship of the House Federal Lands Subcommittee gives him particular sway over Tahoe legislation, the topic of a July 14 hearing. Michael Brown, chief of the North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District, testified that McClintock's proposal would "significantly help" forest fire prevention efforts.

Meanwhile, Leslie Weldon, deputy chief of the Forest Service, cautioned that "we have concerns with a number of provisions."

The House bill, for instance, would exempt forest fuel reduction projects from National Environmental Policy Act requirements. It would also subject forest management protests within the 150,000-acre Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit to mandatory arbitration, which could not be blocked by a judge's restraining order or preliminary injunction.

"What we're hoping is that, as we work through the process, the two bills will become more closely aligned," Julie Regan,

external affairs chief for the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, said Friday.

Garamendi opposes some of the House provisions, which track broader conservative policies concerning public lands, but nonetheless sees the glass as half-full.

“The fact that McClintock is prepared to engage is significant,” Garamendi said. “His bill may be less than optimal, but it’s nonetheless on the right track.”

Still, in a sign of conflict to come, McClintock at the July 14 hearing criticized the “excessive costs” of bills that focus on improving Lake Tahoe’s clarity.

The Senate bill, meanwhile, has at least some wind in its sails by virtue of its strong support by Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada, whose retirement next year could make the Lake Tahoe legislation his final legacy. If both House and Senate pass their bills, differences would have to be worked out in a conference that would test everyone’s willpower, flexibility and deal-making prowess.