

Opinion: Lake Tahoe deserves federal funding

By Dianne Feinstein

In 1997, Lake Tahoe hosted President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore.

The presidential forum they held may not sound like much – meetings with local leaders, grand speeches and the like. But in fact that visit transformed the future of Lake Tahoe.



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The presidential forum signaled the end of decades of neglect and put the Tahoe basin on a path to recovery. Since, each year we've held a summit to bring together key local, state and federal stakeholders – and a great partnership has formed.

I can say, without a doubt, that the work is paying off. In fact, I left the 19th annual summit, hosted in August by Nevada Sen. Dean Heller, feeling more optimistic than ever about the future of Lake Tahoe.

In July 1997, we faced a steep climb. Conservation and restoration efforts were fragmented and uncoordinated, with a host of competing priorities. Now, nearly two decades later, the pieces of the puzzle are sliding into place.

More so than other years, I left the summit last month

confident that we can save this magnificent lake.

The No. 1 source of my optimism is the exceptional team we have in place, a true public-private partnership that is thriving and seeing real results. The diverse set of stakeholders has coalesced over the decades into something very special, sophisticated and successful.

It's a bi-state team that includes federal, state and local officials; businessmen and women; lake scientists; fire chiefs; Forest Service officials; planners; advocates and local residents.

The team includes countless individuals who have dedicated so much time and energy to keeping Tahoe Blue; people like: Govs. Jerry Brown and Brian Sandoval, who continue a great tradition of their predecessors – throughout the years governors such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jim Gibbons and Kenny Guinn have all taken part; John Laird of the California Resources Agency and Leo Drozdoff of the Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources; Patrick Wright, who leads the California Tahoe Conservancy; Joanne Marchetta of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency; Sudeep Chandra, who is an expert on invasive species at the UNR, and Geoff Schladow, of the Tahoe Environmental Research Center and is an expert on lake quality at the UC Davis – their expertise is critical to protect the lake; Amy Berry, who helps raise restoration funds from the private sector through the Tahoe Fund; supervisors from El Dorado and Placer counties in California and from Washoe and Douglas counties in Nevada; and so many gifted others.

In a time of budget cutbacks and lowered expectations, it's important to realize just how much this bipartisan team has been able to achieve to help Lake Tahoe.

In 2000, I authored the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act, which was cosponsored by my California and Nevada colleagues, Sens. Barbara Boxer, Harry Reid and Richard Bryan. This bill kicked

off a 10-year cleanup effort, injecting \$300 million in federal funds that eventually funded more than 600 environmental projects.

Since then, local, state and federal governments – with a lot of help from the private sector – have invested more than \$1.8 billion into Lake Tahoe's future. California has invested \$693 million since the 1997 summit. Nevada has committed \$118 million, plus an additional \$300 million from the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act, which includes land sales. The federal government's total is at \$593.4 million. Local governments have put in \$77.1 million. And the private sector has committed \$328.3 million.

I can't underscore enough the importance of the private sector in all this. Their efforts really show that a public-private partnership can work.

In fact, right before this year's summit, I attended the Tahoe Fund dinner on the Nevada side of the lake, and the year before on the California side. And the Fund has raised more than \$2.5 million over these two years.

This money has supported environmental improvement projects and others such as the Take Care initiative, which is helping to build a new culture of care taking in the region.

The \$1.8 billion, which has been used wisely on the ground, is responsible for a lengthy list of accomplishments.

Years ago, Lake Tahoe was so clear you could see more than 100 feet down. By 1997, however, runoff had reduced that famed clarity to just 64 feet. Today, thanks to a lot of hard work – as well as the drought, which has lowered the lake by 3 feet – we've increased water clarity to nearly 78 feet. The highways around the lake are being transformed so that grit and dirt, which would otherwise run into the lake, are being diverted into catch basins. To date, we've improved erosion control measures on more than 700 miles of roadway.

The team has improved more than 16,000 acres of wildlife habitat, including more than 1,000 acres of sensitive wetlands that filter polluted runoff before it enters the lake. Places like Upper Truckee River, Angora Creek, Trout Creek and Blackwood Creek have all benefitted from these projects.

We've added 2,770 feet of shoreline for public use, improving local quality of life and helping to transform the local economy, as seen in South Lake Tahoe and Commons Beach in Tahoe City.

We've created or improved 143 miles of bike and pedestrian routes. Projects like the Stateline to Stateline Bikeway are seeing thousands of users, and work continues to build a fully-developed trail system around Tahoe.

A comprehensive aquatic invasive species inspection system has been put in place to prevent species like the quagga mussel or Asian clam from entering and devastating the ecosystem.

And we're protecting the Tahoe basin from the threat of wildfire by clearing land of the small trees and undergrowth that fuel fires. To date, we've cleared nearly 60,000 acres of land, nearly twice the area of San Francisco.

For all the great work the team has achieved, there's still a lot more work to do.

This year, an additional bill – the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2015 – is being carried by Sen. Heller, and Sens. Boxer, Reid and myself are cosponsors.

In order to build on all the work we've accomplished, we need to recommit the federal government to saving Lake Tahoe.

The threats facing the lake – erosion, invasive species, wildfires and climate change – are very real, and they aren't going away anytime soon. We need to confront these challenges head-on and solidify our gains.

Our bill would authorize \$415 million over 10 years, with the following primary goals: Further reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire; fund the environmental improvement program to complete additional environmental restoration projects; enhance the lake's storm water management, critical to water clarity; and increase the number of watercraft inspections to combat invasive species.

Simply put, I can't think of a natural wonder more deserving of protection for future generations than Lake Tahoe.

Next year, as he approaches his well-deserved retirement, Sen. Reid will host his last Tahoe Summit.

Like other years, he'll take stock of the improved roadways, the watercraft inspection stations and all the new recreation options.

I believe we'll also be able to show him the impressive strength of the public-private partnership we launched over 18 years ago. Alongside the lake, it's a team that I know will endure.

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