

Historic agreement allows for water storage



In March 2015 there was no water flowing from Lake Tahoe to the Truckee River, which contributed to the need to change water agreements. Photo/LTN file

By Anne Knowles

RENO – The Truckee River Operating Agreement is a done deal.

Parties to the landmark water compact, which went into effect Dec. 1 after nearly three decades of negotiations and work, took time out Tuesday to celebrate.

“From a drought perspective, this is a game changer,” Leo Drozdoff, director of the Nevada Department of Conservation & Natural Resource, said Jan. 5. “It provides certainty in uncertain times.”

The agreement allows upstream users such as Truckee Meadows Water Authority to store water they are entitled to rather than release it from reservoirs if it weren't immediately

needed, and receive a credit to use the water when it is needed.

“We’ve never been able to store water in the winter before,” John Erwin, director of natural resources planning and management at TMWA, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Since Dec. 1, when TROA took effect, TMWA has been able to store 2,700 acre-feet of water. Overall, TMWA expects to triple its storage, helping the municipal water purveyor to handle drought and continue to allow the Truckee Meadows to grow.

California, too, can start storing water rather than diverting it once the Water Resources Board agrees to a reporting framework, probably in a month or so, David Willoughby, engineer with the Watershed Assessment Section of California Department of Water Resources, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The agreement also allows for those credits to be used or exchanged in multiple reservoirs.

“It allows storage by different entities in different spaces. Before it went down the river,” Willoughby said.

The flexibility should also help downstream users.

“Regimented release didn’t always match up to the needs downstream,” Arthur Hinojosa, division of integrated regional water management of California DWR, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Needs are not always consumptive. This is better for the fish and for recreation.”

That includes the endangered Cui-ui and the threatened Lahontan cutthroat trout, vital to the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe and its fishery.

Before TROA, the federal water master was required by court decrees to release water from reservoirs year-round in order to maintain river flows.

Now, the water master and a group of signatories will meet monthly to discuss and schedule variable releases.

The committee – which consists of the federal water master and a representative from California and Nevada, TMWA, Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation – has been meeting for years in what Chad Blanchard, the water master, called mock TROA.

The group has also been using mock data because the ongoing drought has meant there's no water to wrangle over. So they've used made up data that lets them simulate real negotiations.

In December, for the first time, the group used real data, Blanchard told *Lake Tahoe News*.

In the end, the water master is the arbiter who will determine water releases, especially in the case of any minor conflict of interests. If a conflict gets more complicated, Blanchard said TROA stipulates a special hearing prosecutor to settle disputes.

"It is emotional," Mark Foree, general manager of Truckee Meadows Water Authority, said as he looked around the packed room at the Siena Hotel, and added some of the people involved in the agreement had essentially spent their careers on it.

"It was a surreal moment when they reported to us this is done," said Vinton Hawley, tribal chairman, Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe. "I said it let's give it a week and let it set in. Somebody may oppose it."

TMWA and the tribe are two of five major signatories to TROA, an agreement designed to manage allocations among Truckee's users and hopefully end more than a century of court battles over what is considered the country's most litigated river.

TROA has 15 signatories: the five major parties which form the release scheduling group and 10 others – the Carson-Truckee

Water Conservancy District, Washoe County Water Conservation District, the cities of Reno, Sparks and Fernley, Washoe County, Sierra Valley Mutual Water Co., Truckee-Donner Public Utility District, Placer County Water Agency and North Tahoe Public Utility District.

The Truckee-Carson Irrigation District, which manages the Newlands project in Northern Nevada, is not a signatory and TMWA's Foree said TCID in the next few weeks will drop its litigation opposing TROA, removing what the signatories hope is the agreement's final hurdle.