

Opinion: Time to build on Tahoe's momentum

By Joanne Marchetta

At the Lake Tahoe Summit last month, we saw the power of what we can accomplish when we work together. Progress over the last two decades was showcased when President Obama made his first visit to Tahoe and said conservation and restoration efforts like ours are more important than ever as the nation works to adapt to a changing climate and create a more resilient environment.

“When we protect our lands, it helps us protect the climate for the future. So conservation is not just critical for one particular spot, one particular park, one particular lake, it’s critical for our entire ecosystem,” Obama said. “Our healing of Lake Tahoe proves it’s within our power to pass on the incredible bounty of this country to a next generation.”



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The Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2000 and the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act are two pieces of federal legislation that have made monumental contributions to Lake Tahoe's restoration. Together, they helped launch a model for regional collaboration and environmental restoration on the scale needed for Tahoe's 500-square-mile watershed.

Congress passed the restoration act shortly after former President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore attended the inaugural summit in 1997. Held over multiple days, the summit included dozens of community members, researchers, and local, state, and federal partners focused on the environmental problems then facing Lake Tahoe and how to correct them.

These two pieces of legislation authorized and appropriated several hundred million dollars in federal funding to jumpstart the Environmental Improvement Program. The unprecedented initiative united all levels of government, nonprofit groups, and the private sector in a shared mission to restore Lake Tahoe's environment and enhance the public recreation opportunities that drive our economy and help millions of people enjoy this special place each year.

Federal funding was matched by state and local agencies and the private sector. Over the last two decades, hundreds of EIP partners have invested \$2 billion into nearly 500 conservation and restoration projects, with another 120 projects ongoing.

These lake-saving EIP projects have been completed all around the Tahoe Basin and were prioritized to have the greatest benefits for our lake, forests, air quality, wildlife, and communities. Projects have restored stream channels, marshes, and wildlife habitat; built parks and new bike and pedestrian routes; protected Tahoe from aquatic invasive species; upgraded hundreds of miles of roads to stop stormwater pollution from washing into the lake; opened shoreline for public access; and cleared hazardous fuels from tens of thousands of acres of forests to improve their health and reduce wildfire risk.

This work was possible only through partnership and collaboration on a level never before seen at Lake Tahoe, and because of it, our environment is healthier than it was two decades ago.

This year's summit again put a bright national spotlight on the work we have done to restore and conserve the jewel of the Sierra. But it also raised awareness about the challenges we continue to face at Tahoe, all of the work that is not done, and how our mission will become more difficult because of a changing climate that threatens to affect everything from the lake's world-famous water clarity to the health of our forests and ecosystems and winter recreation on our mountains.

We must continue the progress we have achieved through the EIP, completing projects that conserve and restore the environment, improve our community, and revitalize our economy, recognizing that the health of each is intertwined. Federal support is critical in this endeavor. And our region received some highly-encouraging news just two weeks after Obama's visit when the Senate passed its version of the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2015.

Introduced by Sens. Dean Heller, R-Nev., Harry Reid, D-Nev., Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., the bill would reauthorize the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act and up to \$415 million in federal funding over 10 years for high-priority projects that create healthier forests and reduce wildfire risk, clean up stormwater pollution, restore the lake's water clarity, and fight the spread of aquatic invasive species.

The Senate passed its bipartisan legislation as part of the Water Resources Development Act of 2016, a two-year, \$10 billion national water infrastructure bill. Legislation to reauthorize the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act has been introduced in Congress multiple times over the last decade, but each prior bill stalled in committee. This marks the first time legislation to reauthorize the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act has cleared a chamber of Congress, showing the strong bipartisan support we see for restoring one of our greatest national treasures.

The House of Representatives is anticipated to consider its version of the Water Resources Development Act this fall. We are optimistic versions of the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act introduced by Representatives Tom McClintock, R-Calif., Mark Amodei, R-Nev., and John Garamendi, D-Calif., can be included and passed as part of that legislation.

The Lake Tahoe Restoration Act and Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act have driven some of Tahoe's biggest achievements over the last two decades and helped make the Tahoe region a healthier place and a national model for collaboration and partnership. The Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2015 is critical to continuing progress and addressing the challenges that lie ahead. The Senate's passage of this legislation is an important milestone and we look forward to continued support in the House to keep our momentum at Tahoe growing.

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