

# Purity of Lake Tahoe water a source of pride

By Kathryn Reed

“Drink Tahoe tap.” It’s the mantra Madonna Dunbar wants everyone to embrace. She’s so passionate about it that she got the phrase trademarked.

Dunbar is the executive director of the Tahoe Water Suppliers Association. This is a 12-member group, with all but South Tahoe Public Utility District getting its water directly from the lake. The other members are: Cave Rock Water System, Edgewood Water Company, Glenbrook Water Cooperative, Incline Village General Improvement District, Kingsbury General Improvement District, North Tahoe Public Utility District, Round Hill General Improvement District, Skyland Water Company, Tahoe City Public Utility District, Zephyr Water Utility, and Lakeside Park Association. The EPA oversees the water association.

Dunbar gave a talk last week at Lake Tahoe Community College about all things water at the invitation of the American Association of University Women.

“We advocate for protecting Tahoe as a drinking source,” Dunbar said. That is one reason the group is not supportive of the Tahoe Keys wanting to use herbicides to rid its canals of invasive weeds.



Messages about Tahoe's tap water are becoming the norm around water fountains. Photo/LTN

Adding chemicals, even ones approved by the EPA, to Lake Tahoe's water is not something they can support. In-take pipes for the various water agencies are 1,000 to 3,000 feet from the shoreline. That lake water services 20,838 connections and 34,179 full-time residents.

"We are trying to find money to do anything but herbicides," Dunbar said.

What the water association does strongly back is the boating program that mandates inspections of watercraft in order to keep more invasive species from inhabiting Lake Tahoe.

Six members of TWSA have the rare "filtration exemption" status from the Environmental Protection Agency. This means the water is not filtered; Lake Tahoe is that pure.

There are only 60 of these permits throughout the United States. Dunbar said most are in remote areas, like Hetch Hetchy, and usually don't allow recreation on the water body.

A noticeable difference between lake and groundwater is that the latter will have a mineral taste.

She cited the Porter Cologne Act as being the "single biggest thing to protect Tahoe as a clean drinking water source." Two aspects of the bill include the ban of septic tanks and the requirement that wastewater be pumped out of the basin.

One thing Dunbar shakes her head at is bottled water.

"Forty to 50 percent of packaged water is filtered tap water that is sold at 1,000 times the price," Dunbar said. To meet the suggested eight glasses of water a day it would cost 49 cents a year with tap water and \$1,400 with bottled water, she said.

Those bottles take a lot of petroleum to make, most aren't recycled and there is little regulation with bottled water. Dunbar said tap water is more strictly regulated than bottled.

She likes that Truckee is considering banning water that comes in containers less than a gallon, which is something San Francisco already did.

Education about the quality of Tahoe's water is critical, she said, to get people to realize bottled water is a waste in so many regards.