

Climate change, forest fires focus of Tahoe summit



TRPA chief Joanne Marchetta talks to about 300 people about the challenges and successes of protecting Lake Tahoe's environment on Aug. 22 at the annual summit. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

CAMP RICHARDSON – On the same day when climate change and what that means for potential wildland fires dominated the conversation, the reality of the threat came to fruition hours later as firefighters fought multiple blazes from lightning strikes.

Speaker after speaker on Tuesday dwelled on the health of local forests and that more needs to be done to quash the threat of fire. Then that afternoon between 1:51pm and 6:41pm

the Sierra Front Interagency Dispatch Center recorded 12 wildland fires caused by lightning.

Yes, lightning happens in this region in the summer. But there is no arguing the climate is changing. Scientists have the data to back it up.

Joanne Marchetta, executive director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, pointed out how the warming air and water temperatures are impacting the ecosystem in the basin, that drought takes a toll. Climate change is not unique to Tahoe, it's a global crisis, she said.

Aug. 22 marked the annual Lake Tahoe Environmental Summit. With Lake Tahoe's pristine waters as the backdrop at Valhalla, it was hard not to want to buy into what the lawmakers had to sell. The message – the fight to protect the basin on land and water is a struggle, but one that is worth the effort.



California Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Kamala Harris are committed to protecting Lake Tahoe. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Partially it was a new slate of characters on the podium with the retirements of Sens. Harry Reid and Barbara Boxer. Taking their place were Sens. Catherine Cortez Maesto, D-Nev., and Kamala Harris, D-Calif. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., hosted the event which is now in its 21st year. Joining them were Nevada Republican Gov. Brian Sandoval, Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Calif., Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., and Rep. John Garamendi, D-Calif. Bruce Babbitt, secretary of the Interior under President Bill Clinton and the former governor of Arizona, gave the keynote address.

Heller pointed out that at the start of the day more than 1 million acres had already burned in Nevada this year. That number increased in the 24 hours since he spoke because most of those lightning strikes were in his state.

He is an advocate for more funding for Alert Tahoe, which puts cameras in locations to detect wildfires.

“I won’t be satisfied until there is a camera covering every inch of this (basin),” Heller said.

Cortez Maesto said, “We need to appreciate climate change and why fires are happening. The threat is only increasing, especially under this administration.”

Harris said it’s important to realize that it’s not a choice to help the environment or help the economy; that decisions can be made to enhance both. She also promised to be at all future summits, something her predecessor did not believe was important.



Gov. Brian Sandoval said Lake Tahoe is his favorite place.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

Lake Tahoe has long had bipartisan congressional support from both states. They all have stories about what the area means

to them on a personal level. This makes the basin special, showing that cooperation can work.

Another component of Tahoe being able to infuse \$2 billion into environmental projects since the first Lake Tahoe Restoration Act was approved in 2000 is that local government and private individuals/companies have also stepped up to do their part. (The act was reauthorized last year, but the \$415 million over seven years has not been appropriated.)

Babbitt said this is what makes Tahoe unique, that much of what has taken place to improve lake clarity and forest health has been at the ground level and not dictated from those in Washington, Sacramento or Carson City.

While McClintock is not a believer in human-caused climate change, citing how the climate has been changing since the last ice age, he is a huge proponent for being able to make the forest healthier faster.

“The management tools are now in place and we need to use them with the urgency that our forest systems demand and hope that it is not too late,” McClintock said.

On summit day it was announced the Tahoe-Central Sierra Initiative was created as yet another layer to protect Lake Tahoe and the central Sierra from impacts from large, damaging wildfires and unprecedented tree die-off.

Members are Sierra Nevada Conservancy, California Tahoe Conservancy, U.S. Forest Service, Nature Conservancy, National Forest Foundation, University of California, Natural Reserve System-Sagehen Creek Field Station, and California Forestry Association.

The number of dead trees in the Lake Tahoe Basin has more than doubled from 35,000 to 72,000 in the last year.

CalFire has pledged \$5 million to the Sierra Nevada

Conservancy to implement high-priority forest health projects within the TCSI area.

The other financial commitment at the event was the Environmental Protection Agency disclosing it was giving \$197,250 to the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency to assess and restore wetlands in the Lake Tahoe Basin.