

# EDC 'beeting' a path to better roads

By Susan Wood

When it comes to clearing and cleaning up roads in El Dorado County, the lake's new mantra could be "Keep Tahoe Red" in the winter and "Keep Tahoe 'really' Blue" in other seasons.

The county's inventive punch behind road maintenance is twofold – a level of reasoning that could lead to keeping Tahoe in greenbacks.

The topic came up twice during the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors annual gathering in South Lake Tahoe on Oct. 17 – first at the county maintenance yard during an early morning tour and again later at the regular meeting in the city.

Come the (real) snowy season, county road crews plan to use an unconventional substance to de-ice and clear snow that requires less sand. Beet juice – that's their solution.

During a snow conference in Iowa, the county learned about the vegetable-based liquid mix to blend with brine as an effective way to break down the cold enemy. In the long haul, it's more cost-efficient.

And in the road construction season of summer, county storm water and planning gurus Russ Wigart and Brendan Ferry told the board they want to pave their way into lake clarity.



El Dorado County doesn't want it's old equipment to be detriment. Photo/Susan Wood

What might have been a no-go at Ferry's regulatory employer decades ago may just be the county's secret weapon in combating the lake's loss in clarity and crumbling roads over the years.

The two environmental giants joined by Lahontan Water Quality Control's Bob Larsen are making the hard case that fixing and keeping local streets up to par is an environmental argument because the debris from broken down roads more easily turns into sediment that seeps into the lake. And keep in mind, the sediment from asphalt is oil-based.

Beet juice is less corrosive and more environmentally friendly, county equipment superintendent Kent Taylor pointed out on the tour Tuesday. At the same time, beet juice maintains its integrity at minus 15 degrees Fahrenheit. Brine without it works at 15 degrees above. The "ice-biting" soupy beet mix can act like Teflon on a pan.

Alongside Taylor on the tour, county highway superintendent

Matt Moody pointed to a big drum filled with beet juice. The county bought 1,000 gallons for \$500 to try out the substance this year "and see how it works," Moody said.

So, if you notice a reddish color in the snow, don't call in a crime scene, the county warned.

As it is, a backbreaking winter like last year netted 100 calls a day into county road maintenance phone lines.

"We're hoping not to have a winter like last year," Moody said during the transportation yard tour.

The big picture in surviving the seasons means evaluating the roads, the budget, the material and the machines used to clear them of snow.

Keeping 11 aging graders (1982 to 2005) up to par can be a challenge for four mechanics. Each one costs at least \$30,000 in upkeep. They cost about \$400,000 new. That's why El Dorado County is also examining whether leasing one from Washoe County for \$5,000 from November to March is worthwhile.

"They're in as good a shape as they can be," Taylor said, when asked about the health of its own graders that the 14 drivers use to plow snow.

If only one could say the same thing for county roads.

Crews are teaming up with visionary planners like Ferry and Wigart to experiment with different methods of protecting county roads as well as the lake.

It's a win-win type of thinking that could turn a synergistic corner on the relationship between the lake's environment and economic value. Good roads equal a good image to the resident and the visitor. Endless, deep cracks on South Upper Truckee Road, huge pothole-infested streets in the Angora burn area and even the closing of Elks Club Drive for the winter because of a complete road breakdown could be a thing of the past.

And the county seems receptive to throwing its weight behind backing that goal.

County Chief Administrative Officer Don Ashton told Lake Tahoe News, after observing the Ferry-Wigart presentation, El Dorado's \$569 million budget allocates about \$6.5 million to road maintenance. About half of that is discretionary emergency funding special to this year.

Wigart and Ferry are proposing a new funding mechanism be found, suggesting perhaps a user fee, gas tax and water quality grant project or combination thereof that is multi-pronged.

Big and bold in the presentation is a shocking declaration – "Maintaining pavement is a BMP." The notion appears to run contrary to the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's aversion toward material that purports blanket coverage.

But this is a new day and age, requiring a new line of thinking. If anything, TRPA's main mission is still lake clarity. The argument being made is keeping the county's 220 miles of roads paved and fixed is good for lake clarity.

Lake Tahoe lost about one-third of its clarity between 1968 and 2000.

"Paving could be the largest BMP we have," Wigart said. Best management practices are erosion control measures enforced lakewide.

In their board presentation, Wigart and Ferry listed culprits such as roadside soil accounting for 43 percent of the pollution source. A breakdown of particles from asphalt was also dominant at 31 percent. Abrasive sand was third at 16 percent. Heavy equipment also contributes to the rough surfaces. The study was completed during a period of low winter moisture.

"We destroy our roads in winter," Wigart told the board, equating the breakdown of the road to a Jenga puzzle.

The presentation got the supervisors thinking.

"We need to capitalize on the car," Supervisor John Hidahl said.

Most were in agreement that the funding source would need to be multi-dimensional, involving road condition and storm water drainage in order to receive more grant money.

"We've got to start with the basics. You can have the best roads in the world, but it won't make a difference if they don't drain," Supervisor Brian Veerkamp said.

In other action, the board:

- Unanimously approved the sheriff's Office of Emergency Services recommendation that a local state of emergency continues in the county due to severe storms from last winter.
- Considered in a 5-0 vote a \$5,000 request from the Lake Tahoe Bicycle Coalition to support the Lake Tahoe Bikeways map and its overall efforts.