

# 200-acre meadow in S. Lake Tahoe publicly owned



A section of the Upper Truckee River is part of the 200-plus acre land deal. Photo/Kathryn Reed

## By Kathryn Reed

With the acquisition of the 206-acre Johnson Meadow, 93 percent of the Upper Truckee watershed is now owned by public agencies.

Tahoe Resource Conservation District in April closed on the South Lake Tahoe property. It roughly borders Lake Tahoe Airport, Highway 50, the Upper Truckee River on the Sierra Tract side, and the Barton Memorial Hospital/Fourth Street area.

It cost \$8.315 million to buy, with the money coming from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (\$4 million), California Tahoe Conservancy (\$4.215 million), and Tahoe Fund

(\$100,000).

Standing above the river it's like being transported to an oasis that should take hours to walk to, but is less than a five-minute walk from the Sierra Tract neighborhood. Two arms of the river are running at a pretty good clip, with the one to the right likely to dry up as the snowmelt subsides.

Unfolding behind the river is a carpet of native green grasses. From this distance it looks like a playground. One day it might be. Recreation and connectivity are two words being associated with the parcel now that it is in the public domain.

This large swath of land in the middle of South Lake Tahoe was once going to be an integral component of the original South Tahoe Greenway bike trail that was to go from Meyers to Stateline. The owners wouldn't sell. The route was scrapped and downsized.

But with the property now in the public domain it's possible the original plans could be resurrected by the California Tahoe Conservancy.

The CTC tried to buy the land in 2006, but Bill Mosher wouldn't sell. Talks resumed in 2010, then stalled. Then Mosher reached out to the TRCD about three years ago. **Mosher died in January 2017** before the deal could be finalized. His extended family continued on with the talks and made the transaction a reality this spring.

Mosher was familiar with resource conservation districts in the Sacramento area, and knew the work they did. They are all about being local.

"One of the big concerns or challenges is the main channel is deeply incised and the erosion," Nicole Cartwright, TRCD executive director, said as she peered out at the Upper Truckee River.



The Johnson Meadow spills forth beyond the Upper Truckee River, with Lake Tahoe beyond the tree line. Photo/Kathryn Reed

In the distance is a grove of willows where historical photos show the river once ran. This is something scientists are analyzing as they consider how to restore this damaged landscape.

It wasn't that long ago this was ranch land. Names like Mosher, Ledbetter and Johnson all have ties to this acreage. In the ranching world a parcel is named after the previous owner not the current one. So, maybe it will be renamed Mosher Meadow.

In an attempt to be good stewards, the Moshers erected an array of fencing to keep the dairy cows from the river so as to reduce the erosion. Those fences dot the landscape and keep the public from the area.

"There is a lot of fencing throughout the meadow," Cartwright told *LTN*. "There is some exposed barbwire and T-posts in the river."

Safety is the No. 1 concern. That will be addressed before any

real plans are put into action. The majority of the fencing will remain until funding is secured for restoration.

It's estimated that between \$10 million and \$15 million will be needed for planning and implementation. The hope is the plans can be designed in the next three to five years, with implementation taking no more than 10 years.



Molly Hurt and Nicole Cartwright with the TRCD on the remaining portion of the Barton Bridge. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Creating a meandering wet meadow that naturally floods and therefore keeps sediment from reaching Lake Tahoe would be a big goal – just like it is with other reaches of the Upper Truckee River. Providing sustainable recreation and access are other desires. It is possible trails will be built, maybe boardwalks, with connections to other parts of town.

Today there are user created trails; mostly on the border of the property.

This parcel is surrounded by various other landowners, mostly public entities.

Preserving habitat – primarily riparian – will be another centerpiece of restoration work. Song birds, migratory birds and the threatened willow flycatcher make their home here.

“It’s also a refuge for species. As ranges contract these meadows will be ever more important,” Molly Hurt, TRCD director of programs, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

This is the first land acquisition for the TRCD. It’s too soon to know if this is the first of many or the lone one. It was a good fit, according to Cartwright, and one other agencies supported.

Also on this parcel is what’s locally known as Hospital Bridge. A large section of it came tumbling down in winter 2016-17. It was a popular connector for mountain bike riders from Barton Memorial Hospital to what could be considered the Pioneer Trail side of the river.

TRCD wants to rebuild the bridge. It’s possible a temporary structure could be erected, perhaps not in the exact same alignment. A more permanent solution will be studied in the formal planning process.

It was originally installed and maintained by the prior owner, with the last iteration built in the early 1990s.

The money to purchase what at the time was the largest sensitive public land holding in the basin came with strings attached. This means it won’t be developed with structures. But it does mean the public will have access, which hasn’t happened in more than 100 years.