

Testimony of Patrick Wright
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Senate Environment and Public Works Committee
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Thank you for inviting me to testify in support of the reauthorization of the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act. I am testifying today on behalf of a broad coalition of state and local agencies and stakeholders in the Tahoe basin, who all strongly support this important legislation. We applaud the leadership of Senators Feinstein, Reid, Boxer, and Ensign in moving the bill forward.

Current and Future Threats to the Tahoe Basin

Lake Tahoe's spectacular clarity and alpine setting are recognized throughout the world. It is one of the largest, deepest, and clearest lakes on the planet, and its scenic vistas and recreational opportunities have made it a top national and international tourist destination for decades.

But like many national and international treasures, Lake Tahoe has suffered from the impacts of drought, poorly-planned developments, and other threats over the last generation. **Urban runoff** has decreased the lake's famed lake clarity, **overstocked forests** have dramatically increased the risk of catastrophic wildfire, and **limited public facilities and transit systems** are often unable to handle visitor needs and traffic in peak travel seasons.

While these challenges continue to be addressed, a new set of risks have also emerged to the environmental and economic health of the basin. The recent appearance of several **aquatic invasive species**, including the asian clam and several invasive weeds, threatens the ecological health of the lake, the quality of its beaches, and the drinking water supplies of local communities. An invasion of quagga mussels could further wreak havoc with the lake's ecosystem.

The growing impacts of **climate change** also pose a major threat to the environment and economy of the basin. Lake and basin air temperatures have risen significantly in recent years, and more precipitation is falling as rain rather than snow. If these trends continue, sediment-laden runoff will increase, and the basin's forests will become more susceptible to catastrophic wildfire, disease, and pests. These changes could also devastate the basin's tourist-dependent economy.

A Shared Responsibility

The federal government has a long history in responding to these and other threats to the environment and economy of the Lake Tahoe basin. Congress ratified the bi-state compact creating the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA), the nation's first bi-state environmental planning agency, consolidated three national forests into the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit of the U.S. Forest Service, and passed numerous funding bills.

In 1997, President Clinton, in partnership with the two states and the local Tahoe community, launched a comprehensive restoration plan known as the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP). The EIP is collaborative effort funded by federal, state, local, and private sources.

Federal funding: The federal share of the EIP has been provided primarily through the passage of the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act in 2000 and the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act in 2003. These and other sources have provided over \$40 million annually in federal funds to the basin during the last decade.

State funding: The states of California and Nevada have both been strong funding partners with the federal government in the Tahoe basin. The two states have invested over \$800 million in the basin during the last decade through the passage of various voter-approved bonds, and have worked closely with the federal agencies in developing a world-class science program to ensure that the funds are invested in top priority, cost-effective projects.

Local and private funding: Local and private contributions have also been one of the hallmarks of the EIP. Through investments in infrastructure to control polluted runoff from homes, businesses, and public facilities, local and private sources have contributed over \$300 million to the restoration plan in the last decade.

A Decade of Accomplishments

In total, the federal, state, local, and private partners have invested more than \$1.5 billion in EIP projects and programs since 1997. More than 270 large-scale public projects have been built, hundreds more are in the planning stages, and thousands of homeowners are doing their part through defensible space and runoff collection facilities on their properties.

The latest water quality data suggest that these investments are making a difference - a big difference. After decades of losing roughly a foot of visibility every year, the lake's clarity has stabilized in recent years. The basin's watersheds are being restored, its forests are beginning to recover, and its sediment-laden runoff is being captured from thousands of individual sources. Our key EIP accomplishments include:

- Completing stormwater projects that now treat runoff from 323 miles of city and county roads, 80 miles of USFS roads, and 26 miles of state highways;
- Restoring more than 14,000 acres of watersheds and wildlife habitat;
- Acquiring and conserving more than 3,000 acres of environmentally sensitive land;
- Treating or restoring more than 33,000 acres of forest lands; and
- Constructing or improving more than 20 transit facilities and 82 public recreational facilities.

Building upon more than \$50 million of investments in the basin's science program, we also have a new generation of scientific findings and analytic tools to guide our restoration efforts. The Tahoe Science Consortium, a partnership of the lead state and federal agencies and scientists from UC Davis, the

University of Nevada at Reno, and the Desert Research Institute, is developing some of the nation's most advanced models and other tools to prioritize and measure the effectiveness of our projects.

Looking Ahead - A Renewed Commitment

These accomplishments and scientific findings have set the stage for an updated plan and renewed commitments from each of our funding partners. In 2009, the Tahoe basin community of agencies, scientists, and stakeholders developed a comprehensive, \$2.5 billion update to the EIP, which calls for significant new investments in watershed restoration, forest health, aquatic invasive species management, and other high priority projects.

We have also worked hard to secure new funding commitments from our non-federal partners:

- Last year, **Nevada** enacted a \$100 million bond measure to provide its share of funding for the next decade;
- **California** voters will be asked to support a comprehensive water bond on the November 2010 ballot, which would provide over \$100 million to the California Tahoe Conservancy and significant levels of funding from other state agencies;
- **Local agencies** are sustaining their commitments to providing operations and maintenance of hundreds of local projects, even in the face of severe budget deficits; and
- The **private sector** in the basin has pledged to provide an additional \$250 million to implement their share of the EIP.

The Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2009

The Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2009 will provide the federal leadership and funding necessary to maintain this strong partnership. It would authorize \$415 million for the basin's highest priority projects and programs, including:

- **Stormwater management:** \$40 million for projects that capture and treat sediment from the basin's urbanized areas, the largest source of runoff that impacts lake clarity;
- **Watershed restoration:** \$32 million to restore the basin's watersheds and wildlife;
- **Fire risk reduction and forest management:** \$136 million for projects improve forest health and reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire;
- **Invasive species management:** \$20 million for the basin's inspection, treatment, and prevention programs;
- **Lahontan Cutthroat Trout and other special status species:** \$20 million to restore the basin's keystone native species;
- **High priority projects:** \$136 million for the highest priority projects identified annually by the agencies, scientists, and stakeholders in the basin; and
- **Science:** \$30 million to support the basin's science program.

Federal Agency Roles in the LTRA

The bill continues to recognize the importance of continued funding for the **Forest Service**, the basin's largest landowner, which owns more than 75% of the land in the basin. Forest Service funding is essential to protect the health of the basin's forests and watersheds, and to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. Consistent with the national vision recently announced by Agricultural Secretary Tom Vilsack, Tahoe's forests must also be managed to be more resilient to climate change and to open up nontraditional markets for climate storage and biomass energy.

But the bill also recognizes that the Forest Service alone cannot shoulder the federal responsibility for protecting and restoring the basin. Its federal partners at the **Environmental Protection Agency, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Reclamation, the Federal Highway Administration, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service** all have made significant investments in the basin, and all have important mandates to fulfill in the next decade. Accordingly, the bill calls for the President to annually develop a cross-cut budget to ensure that we have a coordinated federal funding strategy.

In particular, the bill provides a strong mandate for the **Environmental Protection Agency** to significantly increase its level of involvement and funding in the basin. Lake Tahoe has been designated as an Outstanding National Resource Water (ONRW), which is afforded the highest level of protection under the Clean Water Act, and the basin's water quality projects and programs are largely being guided by the development of a Clean Water Act and EPA-mandated water quality plan, known as a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL). The Tahoe TMDL is the largest, most expensive, and most scientifically rigorous TMDL in the western United States. It addresses both the significant water and air quality impacts on lake clarity and the ecological health of the Lake Tahoe basin.

The bill would authorize EPA to play a more active role in funding and overseeing a broad range of watershed management projects in the basin. But equally important, it directs EPA, in coordination with the other federal agencies, the states, and TRPA, to establish a comprehensive program to evaluate and report annually to Congress on our progress in restoring the health of the lake and the basin, and in implementing the provisions of this legislation. Building upon the success of the Tahoe Science Consortium, the bill requires EPA to oversee an interagency monitoring and evaluation plan, a comprehensive set of performance measures, independent scientific review processes, further development of scientific and data management tools, annual summaries of priorities and accomplishments, and a public education and outreach program – all to ensure that the highest priority and most cost-effective projects are being implemented.

Drawing from its extensive involvement in other large-scale collaborative watershed restoration efforts, including the Everglades, Chesapeake Bay, Great Lakes, EPA is well positioned to assume this leadership role in the Tahoe basin. As one of the great water bodies of the nation and world, Lake Tahoe is no less deserving of EPA funding, leadership, and support.

The bill also directs the **Fish and Wildlife Service** to lead one of the nation's most aggressive aquatic invasive species programs. The bill authorizes funding for a comprehensive inspection, treatment and

prevention program, and prohibits watercraft that have had contact with quagga or zebra mussel-infested waters from entering Lake Tahoe. These programs and investments are essential to avoid potentially catastrophic impacts on the lake and its economy.

Economic Benefits/Stimulus Funding

We also wish to emphasize that this is not just an environmental bill – it's a jobs bill. Public investments in the health of the basin are also investments in the health of its economy. Like many other areas of the country, the Tahoe basin is reeling from the impacts of the economic downturn, and is seeking funds for projects that would create green jobs and boost the local economy.

The bill authorizes many projects that are eligible for but have received little or no federal stimulus funding. The California Tahoe Conservancy, for example, has recently developed a **2010 Lake Tahoe Sustainability and Economic Stimulus Package**, which includes over \$45 million in water quality and watershed restoration, forest fuels management, recreation, and other projects that could break ground this summer with adequate funding. This green economic stimulus package would create hundreds of jobs and accelerate the basin's transformation into a low-carbon, ecotourism-based economy.

Broad-based Support

Finally, it should be noted that the bill enjoys strong support from all sectors of the Tahoe community. The bill has been endorsed by a broad spectrum of agencies and stakeholders, including:

- The States of California and Nevada;
- The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency;
- The Lake Tahoe Transportation and Water Quality Coalition;
- The League to Save Lake Tahoe;
- The Tahoe Area Sierra Club;
- The North Lake Tahoe Chamber of Commerce;
- The South Lake Tahoe Chamber of Commerce;
- The California Ski Industry Association;
- Trout Unlimited;
- The Trust for Public Land;
- The Tahoe area fire chiefs; and
- many others.

Again, on behalf of these agencies, stakeholders, and others, I appreciate having the opportunity to testify in support of the bill, and appreciate your leadership in moving it forward.

