

Tahoe air too clean to require smog testing



By Kathryn Reed

It would be hard to find someone who doesn't believe air pollution contributes to the decline of Lake Tahoe's clarity. Then why don't residents of the Lake Tahoe Basin have to have smog checks on their vehicles?

Not enough people live here – not enough vehicles pollute the air. The two states don't count out-of-town vehicles, only ones registered here when making the rules.

Neither California nor Nevada requires basin residents to smog their vehicles. The five counties surrounding the lake – El Dorado, Placer, Douglas, Carson City and Washoe – are considered rural, at least in the basin, and therefore are below the population threshold warranting emissions testing.

The Bureau of Automotive Repair, part to the Department of Consumer Affairs in Sacramento, sets the rules. The Department of Motor Vehicles withholds registrations when vehicles fail a smog check.

It was Attorney General Jerry Brown who as governor signed the law in 1972 mandating smog checks in the Golden State.

The California DMV website lists 34 counties requiring smog inspections every other year. Another six, including El Dorado and Placer, require smog certificates within certain ZIP codes. The 96150 code requires it when the vehicle changes owners.

The remaining 18 California counties, including Alpine and

Amador, don't require a smog test – ever.

Much of California requires the “enhanced” smog check. It's like putting your vehicle through a treadmill test. Wheels are spun at 15 and 25 mph to simulate driving. The other test just sticks a rod into the tailpipe to register emissions.

In Nevada, it's folks living in the urban areas of Washoe (Reno) and Clark (Las Vegas) counties who must routinely get their vehicles smogged.

Tahoe's air quality meets the state and federal air standards which is why the basin is exempt from testing. Officials could not explain why smog testing is not put in place as a preventive measure instead of waiting until the air quality necessitates testing.

Even though the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is charged with protecting lake clarity and other environmental issues, it does not have jurisdiction over smog testing. TRPA defers to state and county air quality regulators when it comes to smog.

Better technology in newer vehicles reduces the black gunk spewed from tailpipes. And in theory, visitors will have had their vehicles checked before descending into the basin – assuming they come from one of the counties requiring a check. Plus, if the permanent population dwindles, the number of potential problem vehicles diminishes.

One thing the bi-state agency has been doing since 1993 is collecting revenue from car rental agencies as a way to support public transportation. The \$5.50 a day charge goes to the Tahoe Transportation District.

Fees are collected if the vehicle is rented by or delivered to someone in the basin. The fee is waived for locals renting a car.