

Tahoe water agencies ask Congress for \$5 mil.

By Kathryn Reed



Water officials know that just because Congress has been forthcoming with money in the past for fire suppression projects, doesn't mean it will happen again.

But with more than 80 percent of the Lake Tahoe Basin belonging to the federal government and bipartisan support from the California and Nevada delegations, the odds are increased the next \$5 million installment will be approved.

Dennis Cocking with South Tahoe Public Utility District and Jim Jones, a STPUD board member, spent the better part of last week in Washington trying to secure money for the Lake Tahoe Basin.

A few years ago public water agencies in the basin formed a partnership to better leverage money from Congress. It was determined \$100 million was needed to upgrade the various systems to provide adequate fire suppression, have the inter-agency ties keep water moving around the lake and have the ability to improve storage capacity.

Knowing that dollar amount would be shot down quickly, the agencies put together a four-year plan of action that started in 2008 totaling \$40 million. Because Congress asks for matching dollars, it means \$20 million from the feds and \$20 million locally.

The feds have come through with \$5 million in each of the last fiscal years. What the Tahoe folks were asking for last month was the next \$5 million for fiscal year 2011.

"Fire is a nonpartisan issue," Cocking said. Still, he doesn't expect a decision until next year because of the midterm elections in November.

The problem is for nearly 100 years the Forest Service suppressed fire in the Lake Tahoe Basin. This led to overgrowth and no thinning. That coupled with the water districts being formed decades as municipal agencies without firefighting capabilities has led to the insufficient infrastructure.

The money that has come to Tahoe is divvied up among the agencies based on connections.

Because not all the money gets spent in one year, projects involving federal appropriations are ongoing. The limited building season in Tahoe also necessitates infrastructure improvements take a couple years because not all can be finished between May and October.

While in Washington, Cocking and Jones also attended the Association of California Water Agencies conference.

Bigger-picture water issues are discussed there.

Some in South Lake Tahoe have criticized the district, especially Jones, for spending money on travel.

Cocking defended the district's annual travel expenditures of between \$8,000 and \$10,000 for conferences and trips to Washington and elsewhere.

"When you come back every year with a couple million dollars, it pays for the plane tickets and nights in a hotel," Cocking said.

He said an analysis done last year on the cost of such travel in relation to state and federal funding that was then secured shows a return on investment in excess of 2,000 percent.

On another note, Douglas County is working to consolidate its many water districts to provide consumers with a more efficient and cost-effective program.