

With 38 pipes draining into Lake Tahoe, are lake clarity efforts worth a billion bucks?

By Anne Knowles

Current efforts to improve the clarity of Lake Tahoe are not only a waste of time and money, they are a fraud.

That's the claim made in the inaugural newsletter of the Tahoe Pipe Club, a secretive coalition of "citizen, business owners, scientists and engineers," according to its website, who are fed up with what it says is more than a billion dollars squandered on misguided scientific techniques which have failed to reduce lake turbidity.



One of 13 drains in South Lake Tahoe that reach Lake Tahoe.

Photo/LTN file

In its newsletter and on its website, the group points to "ineffective watershed management practices," consisting of mechanisms such as road gutters and storm drain systems, often

installed in flood-prone areas that do not impact the lake.

“As justification to use lake clarity funds, the public was told that these erosion control and BMP (best management practices) retrofit projects would clean the water which they do not, and these public relations campaigns were the genesis of the hoax which persists still today,” reads the newsletter entitled “Turning Tahoe Black?”

The club advocates using infiltration methods in which stormwater is absorbed into the ground via swales and basins rather than filtered and conveyed back into the lake, and to focus on only those watersheds that have a direct link to the lake in order to best utilize dwindling lake clarity funds.

The newsletter also grades eight clarity projects based on six categories. Only the Montgomery Estates project in South Lake Tahoe received a passing grade and was judged to provide a benefit. The Luther Pass to Meyers project, for example, got an A for urban restoration, a C for hydrologic connectivity, and an F for the remaining criteria.

“The declining water quality and clarity of Lake Tahoe after spending a billion dollars and having ignored what matters most, the urban runoff from highways, streets, roads, and drainage and its discharge directly into Lake Tahoe through culverts and pipes, which account for an estimated 75 percent of the TMDL (total daily maximum load)” spurred members to form the club in 2010, John Runnels, a club member, said in an email to *Lake Tahoe News*.

The club won't release member names or numbers. One member using the pseudonym Tyler Durden, from the book and film “Fight Club,” posts to the website and sends out the group's newsletter. In an email to *Lake Tahoe News*, he says the focus should be on the club's ideas, not its adherents.

“Pipe club is about the idea of sustainable effective urban actions to get to predevelopment clarity,” Durden said in an

email to *Lake Tahoe News*. "Nothing will please us more than disbanding. We agree to dissolve when our goals are met."

Those goals, as outlined at the website, include replacing conveyance-based approaches to water quality with infiltration methods, stopping unnecessary river realignment, no more land coverage tracking for water quality purposes, and an end to road sweeping and the paving of the Lake Tahoe Basin.

The club gets its name from the hundreds of drain pipes that feed into the lake, which the group is documenting in photos and videos at its website and in annual calendars.

"This 2012 Lake Tahoe Storm Drain Calendar is dedicated to the hundreds of urban outfall pipes which chronically discharge toxic storm water directly into the perennial streams of Lake Tahoe and Lake Tahoe itself every time it rains or snows," reads the website.

The group has identified 38 pipes it says are a priority: 13 in South Lake Tahoe, including the three El Dorado pipes; 10 in McKinney Bay; four in Tahoe Pines; three in Kings Beach; two in Incline Village; and one each in Carnelian Bay, Marla Bay, Meeks Bay, Sunnyside, Tahoe Vista and Tahoma.

"The pipe club is compiling all this evidence of pipes putting dirty water into the lake," said Dylan Eichenberg, a senior at UC Berkeley who is studying conservation and resource management, grew up in Tahoma and supports the pipe club's goals. "The pipes are by far one of the most significant impacts on the lake."

Eichenberg is not a member of the club, but knows some of its members, has followed its work and supports it, and studied the same issues for his term paper entitled "Urban Impacts on Lake Tahoe". He would like to see what he calls "rain gardens" installed at the lake, which stormwater would flow into instead of storm drains.

“There could be trenches or basins every couple blocks as needed,” Eichenberg said.

Tahoe Pipe Club is also routinely taking Secchi depth measurements and posting the results to Twitter and Facebook. Secchi depth measurements gauge water clarity using a dinner-dish sized-disk lowered into the water. Clarity is measured at the depth at which the disk is last visible to the naked eye.

The club hopes by posting the data and other related science it can raise public consciousness on the issue and influence lake clarity work and the resources supporting it. The group has no plans to raise money or initiate projects, and it does not attend public meetings such as the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, although it keeps the TRPA informed of its work.

For its part, the TRPA says it is aware of the group but defends its focus on water quality treatment based on the existing conveyance approach.

“TRPA appreciates Tahoe Pipe Club’s dedication to the water quality of Lake Tahoe,” the TRPA said in a statement provided to *Lake Tahoe News*. “The problem is not what comes out of the pipes, but what goes in. That is why TRPA is committed to supporting environmental redevelopment projects that include erosion control efforts for treating stormwater runoff in our built environment, from which science tells us is where 72 percent of the pollution entering Lake Tahoe comes. As water quality science evolves, TRPA will continue to support the most effective techniques for treating storm water on both public and private property.”