

Lahontan seeks ideas to combat climate change

By Kathryn Reed

Climate change is going to bring bigger floods, warmer waters, less snow and more rain to the Lake Tahoe Basin, according to scientists.

And then what?

The Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board is asking that and other questions.

"We have tools. But the big question is what tools don't we have to deal with climate change?" Patty Kouyoumdjian, executive officer of Lahontan, posed to her board at a May 14 workshop.

She said in 2005 when California began to seriously look at what could be done to combat climate change officials thought there was plenty of time to find solutions. That's not the case. The problem is here. The Round Fire near Mammoth in February destroyed 40 houses. It was the snow line that stopped it. A reality of climate change is that wildfires won't be seasonal, but instead will be year-round.

More floods means structures will be threatened or damaged, and wetlands will be overrun with water. Water quality ultimately will be impacted. That is why Lahontan is involved. The California agency deals strictly with water issues.

As Lake Tahoe and other bodies of water continue to warm, assuming predictions come true, there will be more harmful algal blooms, an increase in invasive species and a stressed aquatic system.

With less snow comes a drying of wells, unhealthy forests and

less recharge.

The state has tasked the regional water boards with needing to come up with ways to deal with climate change. Lahontan had two public workshops in the last year, the board workshop on Thursday and staff will now devise a draft report that is expected to be completed this summer, with the final done by the end of the year.

Out of the 100 comments submitted at the public workshops came 400 ideas. The four main themes were protecting resources and providing resiliency; improving water supply and water quality; communicating, collaborating, and streamlining processes; and other considerations and opportunities.

The board (Kimberly Cox was absent) is most interested in looking into having the whole jurisdiction comply with stream environmental zones – better known as floodplains and wetlands outside the basin – in the same manner Lake Tahoe and Truckee are mandated to.

Protecting the groundwater supply – aka the aquifer – also is a top concern.

“We don’t want to lose aquifer capacity. We need to protect the groundwater recharge,” board member Amy Horne said.

With flooding usually being short term, that was less of a concern for her.

“Maybe stormwater needs to be looked at as an asset instead of a pollutant,” board member Eric Sandel said. “We need the water. Just because it may have something in it we don’t like we can deal with that later.”

The board recognized that whatever solutions are put on the table that there could be political, financial and jurisdictional constraints. It was stressed that working with other agencies as well as the public is going to be imperative

to accomplishing many of the goals. A large part of this has to do with Lahontan not having the ability to dictate land use policy.

Board member Peter Pumphrey stressed the need to be “nimble” so whatever is ultimately decided as the focus can be altered as science evolves and other changes take place.

Borrowing from the total maximum daily load requirements when it comes to adaptive management was suggested.