Opinion: Tahoe ahead of the game at landscape level

By Joanne Marchetta

Restoring and conserving our environment at Lake Tahoe means setting our aspirations at the right scale. That's what TRPA and many partners are working to do through strategic initiatives to ensure the health of our basin's forests, streams, and lake, and to improve our communities and transportation infrastructure.

Regions around the world are now working to conserve natural resources and ecosystems at the landscape level, not the political boundary level. That includes Chesapeake Bay, Puget Sound, and the Great Lakes; large, complicated watersheds whose conservation requires multiple jurisdictions working together.

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We are fortunate that trailblazers in California and Nevada had the vision decades ago to recognize the need to protect Tahoe as a watershed. They realized their initiative would fall short unless both states and all of our local governments were on board.

As a leader in environmental conservation and restoration at the landscape level, TRPA has a seat on the executive

committee of the Large Landscape Conservation Practitioners' Network. Natural resource managers nationwide are starting to address issues at the ecosystem scale, the same scale our regional collaborative uses to make real progress at Tahoe. And we are committed to sharing our knowledge and learning from others how we can do better.

Lake Tahoe faces major challenges. Population growth in nearby metropolitan areas will drive increased visitation to our communities and our public lands, stressing our infrastructure and natural resources. A changing climate and its potential for prolonged drought will impact the health of our forests, lake, and recreation-based economy. Our strategic initiatives at TRPA focus on facing these challenges and making our region as resilient as possible.

One of our strategic initiatives focuses on improving the system of development commodities in the Tahoe Basin, which has brought private investment in property upgrades to a virtual crawl. The movement, conversion, use, and supply of residential units, commercial floor area, and tourist accommodation units are all limited at Tahoe. While maintaining limits on total development, we must improve the commodities system to make sure it allows and encourages the kind of environmental redevelopment projects we need to protect our lake, restore environmentally sensitive areas like marshes and streams, and revitalize our town centers.

On another part of the landscape, TRPA and other members of the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team have worked together to reduce hazardous fuels on tens of thousands of acres of forest in the Tahoe Basin. We have treated about half of the 117,000 acres of wildland urban interface where communities and forests meet and we have plans to treat the rest over the next 10 years.

But we are also working on a strategic initiative to scale those projects up to remove fuels from the extensive forested lands beyond the wildland urban interface. In light of the

drought and warming climate, this work is critical to maintain the health of our forests and protect our water resources and communities from the risk of both catastrophic wildfire and emerging insect threats causing vast tree mortality associated with the drought that could, with a foothold here, change the face of the Sierra forest as we know it.

As TRPA and partner agencies complete the 2015 Threshold Evaluation Report, the latest five-year snapshot of Lake Tahoe's environmental health, we are also working to overhaul our outdated system of threshold indicators.

More than 150 indicators are used to gauge our progress in conserving and restoring Tahoe's water and air quality, soil, vegetation, fish and wildlife habitat, scenic qualities, and recreation opportunities. We need to comprehensively update this 30-year-old monitoring system to ensure it is as efficient and scientifically sound as possible, so Tahoe agencies have the information they need to assess the health of our environment and the effectiveness of our policies.

We'll complete another major priority this year, an update to our Regional Transportation Plan. The plan's main focus is to better handle the heavy visitation our region sees and improve transportation options in our communities so people don't need cars to get to work, school, shopping centers, or recreation areas. This will involve better regional transit service, better bike and pedestrian trails, and the adoption of new technologies. Transportation is transformation at Lake Tahoe, and by upgrading our transportation system we can improve our air and water quality and our communities.

We set our aspirations high on the large challenges on our horizon at Lake Tahoe, and we can reach them working together.

We are fortunate to be one of the country's first regions to realize the need to work together at the landscape level to ensure the Jewel of the Sierra remains healthy for future

generations to enjoy. Tahoe has been a leader in collaboration for decades, but now is the time to redouble our will and energy to collaborate and work together to confront the challenges that face our environment and our communities.

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