

*Statement of Senator Harry Reid on Introduction of the
Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2009
November 2, 2009*

MR. REID: Mr. President, I rise today with my good friends, Senator FEINSTEIN, Senator ENSIGN, and Senator BOXER to introduce the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2009.

Representatives Heller, Titus, Berkley and others will be introducing an identical version of this legislation in the House of Representatives today, and I urge both bodies to act swiftly on this important legislation.

Lake Tahoe is a place of incredible beauty. The clear blue waters of the lake, surrounded by forested slopes and snow-capped peaks is a sight that can stir the soul. When Mark Twain first saw Lake Tahoe in 1861, he described it as “a noble sheet of blue water lifted six thousand three hundred feet above the level of the sea, and walled in by a rim of snow-clad mountain peaks that towered aloft full three thousand feet higher still!” He went on to proclaim the view in front of him as surely “the fairest picture the whole earth affords.” Mr. President, I could not agree more.

But the Lake Tahoe Basin faces some great challenges. The famed clarity of the lake declined by over a third during the last 50 years; it is estimated that 25 percent of the trees in the basin are dead or dying; the Lahontan cutthroat trout that once grew to 40 pounds or more in Lake Tahoe are no longer present; and many of the Basin’s natural marshes and wetlands have been altered or drained.

It became clear to me in the 1990s that a major commitment was needed to turn things around for the health and future of Lake Tahoe and the Lake Tahoe Basin. In 1996, I called then-President Clinton and Vice President Gore and asked if they would come to Lake Tahoe with me so that they could see both the incredible beauty of the place and many threats facing this rare jewel. When we convened in July 1997, the President and Vice President brought four cabinet secretaries with them and we had a serious multi-day session on the future of Lake Tahoe. President Clinton promised to make Lake Tahoe a priority - for the people of Nevada, for the people of California and for the whole country. An executive order and the subsequent Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2000 underscored that commitment.

It would have been difficult to imagine at that first summit how much progress we would be able to make in 12 years. The clarity of the lake now appears to have stabilized, thousands of acres of forest lands have been restored, roads and highways across the basin have been improved to limit runoff, and the natural function of many miles of stream zones and riparian areas has been restored. But there is a great deal yet to be done. We offer this legislation as the next step.

The Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2009 focuses federal attention on the areas where we can be most effective and it builds on the lessons we have learned since 1997. The basic summary of the bill is that it authorizes \$415 million over 8 years to improve water clarity, reduce the threat of fire, and restore the environment. But I'd like to take a few minutes to explain some of the components in greater depth.

It would be impossible to make real progress in the Lake Tahoe Basin without working hand-in-hand with the Forest Service, which manages 75 percent of the land in the area. With that in mind, we call on the Forest Service to support the thresholds put forth by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, we provide encouragement and funding to work on the restoration of stream environment zones, and we withdraw all Forest Service in the Basin lands from mineral entry in order to minimize soil disturbance. The Forest Service is also granted increased flexibility to exchange land with the states of Nevada and California which will allow for more cost-efficient management of the over 8,000 publicly owned urban parcels spread throughout the Basin. Currently, the Forest Service owns over 3,280 of these urban parcels and there are questions about whether it is in the public interest for the Forest Service to manage these urban lands or whether it would be better to pass them to other responsible entities that could provide more efficient management. We have asked the Forest Service to report to Congress on their plans for improving this part of their program, including any suggestions for how Congress might be able to help. Along with these new authorities and direction for forest management, the bill authorizes \$136 million to reduce the threat of wildfire. This includes work on Forest Service lands as well as work done by local fire agencies. Local communities and fire districts that receive grants from this generous program will provide a 25 percent cash match.

The Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) is another key part of restoration efforts in the Basin. The EIP is a list, prepared by Lake Tahoe stakeholders, of projects that are designed to improve water quality, forest health, air quality and fish and wildlife habitat around Lake Tahoe. As part of this bill we authorize \$136 million for federal funding to support EIP projects.

We also call on stakeholders in the Basin to carefully rank the projects in the EIP, using the best available science, in order to give everyone involved an understanding of the long term priorities and goals of the program. Through this ranking, when state, local, or private funds become available, the stakeholders and government agencies can move immediately to fund and implement the projects that are most vital and in keeping with the long-range vision for environmental restoration in the Basin.

Another important authorization in the bill is \$72 million for stormwater management and watershed restoration projects which have been determined to be among the most effective ways to improve water clarity. These are projects designed to reduce the inflow of very fine sediment into the lake through improvement of urban stormwater systems or the restoration of natural watershed functions in the Basin's streams and marsh areas.

The legislation also takes great strides in protecting Lake Tahoe from dangerous invasive species like quagga and zebra mussels. The damage that would be inflicted at Lake Tahoe by a quagga or zebra mussel infestation has been estimated to be in the tens of millions of dollars annually. These organisms destroy native ecosystems. Their rampant reproduction upsets food chains and drives other species out of existence. Dense accumulation of shells damages infrastructure, clogs water pipes and fouls boats and motors. As has been experienced in other parts of our country, these invasive species can leave boulders and beaches covered in an unsightly, foul-smelling, crust of sharp fingernail-sized shells. In order to protect Lake Tahoe from this horrible fate, our bill would provide \$20 million for watercraft inspections and removal of existing invasive species from Lake Tahoe. Further, we prohibit watercraft that have had contact with quagga or zebra mussel-infested waters from entering waterbodies in the Lake Tahoe Basin. All other watercraft must submit to inspection and decontamination prior to launch in order to prevent the introduction of these harmful species. Watercraft can be exempted from decontamination if they have not launched elsewhere since last being in Lake Tahoe.

Of special importance to me, Mr. President, this legislation authorizes \$20 million to help implement the full-scale recovery of the Lahontan cutthroat trout. This iconic fish was highly sought by anglers for generations, and was the top predator in the lake's ecosystem. Populations started to decline when widespread logging and pulp operations came to the Tahoe Basin, damaging crucial spawning areas. This, combined with serious overfishing, led to a sharp decline in population levels. To make matters worse, a number of non-native fish were introduced into Lake Tahoe and began to prey upon the remaining juvenile cutthroats.

We have since made great progress in cleaning up the Basin's streams and restoring lost habitat, but we will need to take additional steps to bring this great fish back to Lake Tahoe. The funding authorized by this legislation will make these steps possible. I would also like to note, Mr. President, that the Fish and Wildlife Service has made great progress in bringing Lahontan cutthroat trout back to Fallen Leaf Lake, in the Tahoe Basin. I have faith that they can work similar wonders in Lake Tahoe.

Another piece of this bill that we have put a lot of time and thought into is the science program. A solid understanding of how our restoration efforts are working, and how natural physical and biological processes affect the lake is critical to ensuring continued progress in restoring the health of the Basin. The legislation authorizes \$30 million for scientific programs and research that will produce information on long-term trends in the Basin and provide the basis for selection of the most effective projects. To help coordinate efforts, all projects funded by this legislation will have monitoring and assessment built into their project design so that we can better understand their contributions to restoration in the Basin.

A great deal of work has gone into this bill, Mr. President, and I am grateful for the help and assistance that my colleagues and their staffs have provided. Senator Feinstein and her staff deserve special praise for their diligent efforts. I also sincerely appreciate the time and attention of the many people in Nevada and California who have provided crucial input along the way.

Mr. President, anyone who has been to Lake Tahoe knows that it is not just uniquely beautiful but that it is also worth fighting to protect. It is my sincere hope that my grandchildren will see the day when the Lake's clarity is restored to 100 feet or more, when Tahoe's giant native trout are once again plentiful, and when nearby forests are diverse and healthy. Mark Twain saw something amazing when he crested into the Lake Tahoe Basin. We owe it to ourselves and to subsequent generations to restore as much of that splendor as we can. This bill is the next step in that journey.