

UPPER TRUCKEE RIVER RESTORATION UPDATE

Upper Truckee River Watershed

The Upper Truckee River (River) is the largest tributary to Lake Tahoe, draining approximately one third of the Lake Tahoe Basin (Basin) land area and contributing much of the fine sediment that impacts lake clarity. The Upper Truckee River watershed has a larger amount of wetland by area than any other Basin watershed. Wetlands play an outsize role in providing habitat, increasing climate resilience, and improving water quality. Unfortunately, past and current land uses and development have significantly degraded the watershed, as it supports fewer quality habitats and stores less carbon than prior to urbanization.

An urgent and compelling need exists for Basin agencies, the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California (Washoe Tribe), and partners to continue to collaborate towards a vision—40 years in the making—for a restored and resilient watershed. This watershed also holds particular importance to the waší·šiw (Washoe people—the people from here), who stewarded these lands for millennia and protected habitats for culturally significant plants and animals.

Fulfilling the watershed vision and tribal interests requires broad and ongoing collaboration and partnerships under the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program (EIP). Through the EIP, public and private partners have prioritized acquiring and restoring lands along the River. Public landownership now extends nearly uninterrupted from the community of Meyers downstream to Lake Tahoe, providing the opportunity to connect people and wildlife throughout the River corridor.

Agencies have completed several River restoration projects and are currently planning additional projects (Attachment 1). The goal is to restore ecological processes, improve water quality and drought resilience, provide refugia from the impacts of climate change, and enhance opportunities for all people to experience and enjoy the River corridor. The projects also present opportunities for Washoe Tribe access and co-management, cultural burning and culturally significant plant establishment and harvest.

The Conservancy is currently planning two significant River projects. The Upper Truckee Marsh South project includes the recently acquired Upper Truckee Marsh South property (site of the former Motel 6) and is currently in the conceptual development and

public outreach stage. The Upper Truckee River Sunset Stables, Reach 6 Project (Reach 6 Project) (Attachment 2) is also in project planning and development, and includes habitat restoration with conifer removal on Conservancy land. The Reach 6 Project is located just south of the Lake Tahoe Airport and includes the Conservancy's Elks Club property.

A Watershed Partnership

Partnerships are critical for restoring the River and its watershed. Six agencies have led or are leading major restoration and public access projects, and numerous other agencies have played important roles in shaping, funding, and permitting these efforts. Federal, Tribal, state, local, and private partners have contributed funding and support, making a collaborative watershed vision possible. The Upper Truckee River Watershed Advisory Group coordinates projects along the River, ensuring that watershed restoration is comprehensive and projects are complementary. Project leads also form technical advisory committees and science review teams to garner regulatory and technical input when developing projects. The Washoe Tribe has assisted with cultural resource surveys and construction monitoring. Projects also provide opportunities to advance Tribal leadership.

Cutting the Green Tape

State and regional efforts are underway to "cut the green tape" by streamlining planning processes to increase the pace and scale of restoration. The Conservancy's 2024-2029 Strategic Plan also emphasizes the importance of simplifying processes to improve efficiency, while maintaining quality and integrity in its conservation efforts. The legislature has continued to reform the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), creating exemptions for qualifying projects. The Statutory Exemption for Restoration Projects (SERP), created by Senate Bill 155, enables the Conservancy or other lead agencies to implement a restoration project without requiring the completion of an Environmental Impact Report or Negative Declaration. The SERP is designed to be a collaborative approach for restoring critical fish and wildlife habitats.

The SERP process has been successfully used to complete restoration projects around the state and in the Basin. The California Natural Resources Agency and California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) have noted that the SERP and other green tape advancements have significantly aided the State in advancing the Pathways to 30x30 initiative, along with enhancing biodiversity.

The Reach 6 Project qualifies for SERP because it is a habitat restoration project, and the goals include restoring wetlands, enhancing habitats, and increasing climate resilience. The primary restoration actions involve the Conservancy removing fill and

lowering floodplains, installing wood along banks, and removing conifer trees. The USDA Forest Service, Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit is providing federal funding for the project and has been an active partner on restoration work in this area for decades.

The Conservancy has not previously used the SERP process and is updating the Board because it is different from the CEQA processes staff has used for other restoration projects. The Conservancy is following the SERP process for the Reach 6 Project. Conservancy staff met with the CDFW to discuss the project and confirmed that it is a good fit for the exemption. The Conservancy's Executive Director will make a determination whether the project is exempt. If it is determined that the project is exempt, then Conservancy staff can begin the official concurrence process with the CDFW. Next, the CDFW must concur with this determination, based on formal consultation with Conservancy staff. In addition to the process with the CDFW, Conservancy staff will continue to engage with partners and the public to ensure project success. After the initial Conservancy determination and CDFW concurrence, Conservancy staff will bring the project to the Board for funding and implementation authorization.

List of Attachments

Attachment 1 – Upper Truckee River Restoration Projects

Attachment 2 – Upper Truckee River Sunset Stables, Reach 6 Project

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