



Editorial: Environmental agencies are criticized, but not always fairly

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Several high-profile U.S. senators have joined the battle over the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's rules and regulations.

After a presentation last Friday by the Nevada Fire Safe Council, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., suggested declaring a temporary emergency in the Lake Tahoe Basin that would override regulations the council contends hinder fuels reduction.

The senators, along with Rep. Dean Heller, Secretary of the Interior Dick Kempthorne and U.S. Forest Service Chief Gail Kimbell stopped at a fuels reduction project in Glenbrook on their way to the 10th Anniversary Lake Tahoe Forum where former President Bill Clinton urged continued efforts to protect Lake Tahoe.

Feinstein's declaration came on the heels of a statement by Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., that echoes that of many Tahoe residents: "The No. 1 issue facing the basin is fire," Reid said. "It's time to cut through the red tape."

Sens. Reid and John Ensign, R-Nev., seconded Feinstein's call and asked Kimbell to call a September meeting in Washington where Kimbell, the three senators, and Kempthorne could discuss the matter.

To be fair, though, Feinstein et al. didn't single out the TRPA. The trio also pointed to regulations of the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board and county air quality control districts that slow efforts to treat forests.

But much of the antagonism was aimed at the TRPA.

Said Ensign: "TRPA needs to love the forest enough to help it. I don't care about the bureaucrats. I want them to get out of the way. Bottom line, there's a problem here."

The problem may have worsened as a result of Wednesday's TRPA Governing Board monthly meeting. Against the grumblings of several members, the board voted to create the "Catastrophic Wildlife Prevention Committee."

According to board member Coe Swobe, who wrote the resolution, the committee will be a "positive and proactive" step by the planning agency to prevent catastrophic wildfire in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

But here's the rub: On Aug. 17, the TRPA created the "Fire and Fuels Planning Team" to be staffed by TRPA employees. That team "will work internally to coordinate and strategize approaches to streamline TRPA processes regarding fuels and fire issues," a TRPA memorandum explained.

Some board members think the two new committees will only add to the TRPA's red tape at a time when politicians and citizens are pummeling the agency for being inefficient and overly bureaucratic.

"My concern is that we have a train wreck coming," said board member Allen Biaggi, referring to the potential confusion if the findings of the board committee conflicts with planning team's conclusions.

It's too early, however, to throw water on this potential bureaucratic fire, so we'll give the governing board a chance to prove it made a wise decision. It's obvious that board members and TRPA staff are sincerely trying to tackle the basin's thorny issues, but adding another layer of oversight may only bog down an already laborious process.

Now back to Ensign: Yes, there's a problem, as he said, but statements skewering well-intentioned bureaucrats only inflames an already volatile situation.

The bureaucrats Ensign decries are following regulations they are obliged to follow. The TRPA and other organizations are charged with keeping Lake Tahoe and its surrounding environment pristine and the basin's stream zones healthy. The responsibility is enormous, and often contradictory.

Cut trees and you remove aspects of the area's beauty and ecosystem - but you also decrease fire danger. Allow significant fuel reduction around sensitive streams and you allow runoff to invade the water and potentially seep into the lake - but once again you've decreased fire danger.

It's a quagmire, either way: The agencies must determine how best to keep the area beautiful while simultaneously protecting against

potentially catastrophic wildfires. Is it little wonder, then, that TRPA Executive Director John Singlaub and his staff are constantly dodging barbs and arrows?

But it's also understandable when homeowners and others cry foul at actual and perceived government ordinances that seem to fly in the face of reason. So, too, do they rebel when faced with seemingly rigid government bureaucrats.

Here's one problem: The TRPA Code of Ordinances.

It's huge and confusing. "Chapter 71 - Tree Removal," for instance, gobbled 15 8 1/2-by-11 inch pages when printed out. And most of it is in government bureaucratese. Even homeowners really intrigued by the ordinances will have trouble deciphering some of them. Those less interested will simply not try.

And that leads to conflict and misunderstanding.

Contrary to what some citizens may believe, the tree removal section details permitted tree cutting under a variety of scenarios, among them "to protect lives and property," and to mitigate "a fire hazard."

But how many homeowners will wade through the acres of rules and regulations until they absolutely have to - say after an Angora-type fire? Probably the same few who meticulously read their confusing homeowner's insurance packets before floods wash away their houses.

There's another way, however, to get the same information in a more reader-friendly format.

According to Julie Regan, TRPA communications and legislative affairs chief, the agency has over the past five years issued a variety of brochures detailing such issues as defensible space, tree cutting, best management practices and fire-resistant building materials. All brochures are on the TRPA Web site: www.trpa.org. They can also be obtained through either TRPA location in South or North Lake Tahoe or at area special events.

As for the agency's code of ordinances, the TRPA Governing Board should instruct staff to review and significantly streamline the entire 11-section document. Other government agencies charged with protecting Lake Tahoe's environment should follow suit.

Easily understandable rules and regulations are the first step to ensure a congenial and mutually beneficial relationship between Tahoe's citizens and the basin's governing bodies.

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