

WRITTEN TESTIMONY FOR THE RECORD  
OF  
JULIE W. REGAN  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
TAHOE REGIONAL PLANNING AGENCY  
ON  
“SUSTAINABLE TOURISM FOR A THRIVING ECONOMY”  
BEFORE THE  
UNITED STATES SENATE  
COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TOURISM, TRADE, AND EXPORT PROMOTION  
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Good morning, Chairwoman Rosen, Ranking Member Budd, and members of the subcommittee, I am Julie Regan, Executive Director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. Our organization was formed by an interstate Compact between California and Nevada and ratified by Congress nearly 55 years ago. Our mission is to protect Lake Tahoe while supporting our communities.

Lake Tahoe straddles the states of California and Nevada, high in the Sierra Nevada mountains sitting at more than 6,200 feet of elevation. It is the second deepest lake in the United States and one of the clearest large lakes in the world. For those of you who have visited, I'm sure you'd agree that Lake Tahoe is breathtaking and truly a national treasure.

Nearly 80 percent of the Tahoe Basin is owned by the federal government and managed by the USDA Forest Service. Our small, year-round population of 55,000 swells to approximately 15 million visitors annually. As a year-round destination, tourism and outdoor recreation play a vital role in our region's \$5 billion annual economy.

I appreciate the opportunity to address the subcommittee today. At Lake Tahoe we have an expression that the environment is the economy, and the economy is the environment. The two are intertwined. This sentiment is aligned with the Department of Commerce's 2022 National Travel and Tourism Strategy, and I'll highlight how our work supports the national framework.

The modern history of Tahoe began in 1960 with the Winter Olympics. The international spotlight led to a building boom and unregulated development around the lake. The vision then – which was not fulfilled – was for a population of 750,000 full-time residents, complete with a four-lane freeway atop the majestic mountain peaks of the Tahoe Basin.

To more thoughtfully manage development and protect the lake, Nevada and California came together in 1969 to create our agency, and with it a shared vision for the long-term restoration and resilience of the region.

The era of partnerships that resulted has paid dividends over the years and delivered many of Tahoe's greatest successes and protections including our latest groundbreaking partnership in Destination Stewardship.

Over the last 20 years, Tahoe's main tourism driver has evolved from gaming to outdoor recreation. As visitors and residents moved from the casino floors to the outdoors, our region's infrastructure has not kept pace to handle this shift.

Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a sudden and sharp rise in visitation to Tahoe, and with it many disturbing impacts including traffic, litter, illegal campfires, and impacts to quality of life for residents. While many tourist destinations shut down during the pandemic, millions flocked to Tahoe's abundant public lands to explore the great outdoors.

In response, recreation and tourism partners came together to take swift action to deal with these new pressures. Since March 2020, nearly 200 stakeholders have coordinated the region's response and

implemented many stewardship actions to mitigate tourism's changing impact. Out of this, an inclusive planning process and long-term vision were born.

Earlier this year, 18 regional organizations launched our first ever Destination Stewardship Plan. The plan was based on input from 3,000 residents, visitors, and businesses through surveys, interviews, and workshops.

At its core, the Plan recognizes that a thriving tourism and recreation-based economy needs to visibly improve quality of life, address community priorities, and support environmental stewardship.

The plan contains 32 actions to reduce peak demand impacts, improve infrastructure and enforcement of local rules all while supporting public access to connect visitors with Tahoe's crystal clear waters, and unparalleled mountain vistas.

Many actions in the plan align with the national strategy and create multiple wins for Lake Tahoe.

First, under the national strategy's pillar of Ensuring Diverse, Inclusive, and Accessible Tourism Experiences - our agency recently completed a transportation equity study that identified our most under-served populations and how to better connect people to recreation sites.

Second, under the pillar of fostering resilient and sustainable travel - transportation is a top source of greenhouse gas emissions and our Destination Stewardship strategies will help solve many of Tahoe's transportation challenges. Our small rural road network is not equipped to handle the 10 million vehicles that pass through our region annually.

To meaningfully reduce traffic congestion, we are investing in transit, trails, and technology to move visitors to and from recreation sites without the need of a car. Through the Lake Tahoe Sustainability Action Plan and Climate Resilience Action Strategy, we are moving toward our goal of Net-Zero carbon emissions by 2045.

Better managing transportation and visitation also protects Tahoe's famed lake clarity and environmental resources. It's possible to see 70 feet down into the lake and keeping Tahoe blue is at the heart of our work on destination stewardship. This work builds on Lake Tahoe's proven track record of public-private partnerships through the Environmental Improvement Program, or EIP as we call it. The EIP is one of the most comprehensive landscape-scale conservation programs in the nation. The program incorporates climate resilience across all focus areas, including sustainable recreation and transportation.

Since 1997, more than \$2.8 billion in local, private, state, and federal funding has been invested in restoration projects and programs, creating an average of 1,700 jobs per year.

The Lake Tahoe Restoration Act has provided the lion's share of federal support for the EIP: \$410 million over the last 25 years. On behalf of the Tahoe partnership, the group the late Senator Dianne Feinstein dubbed "Team Tahoe," I want to express our gratitude for the federal support to date.

However, the 2016 renewal of the restoration act is expiring at the end of this year and just under 27 percent of authorized funding has been appropriated.

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Chair Rosen, along with the other members of Tahoe’s delegation have sponsored a 10-year extension bill and, alongside our delegation, Team Tahoe is calling on Congress to ensure this critical authorization does not lapse.

The partnership model of the EIP has helped bring our Destination Stewardship plan to life and may serve as a model for other destinations. We will continue to rely on what we call “epic collaboration” to manage current and future demands so that we can preserve Lake Tahoe – a place the great American writer and commentator, Mark Twain, once famously called, “the fairest picture the whole world affords.”

Thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions.