

Eagle Falls Work Will Enhance Water Quality and the Visitor Experience

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Most Tahoe Basin residents know that the clarity of Lake Tahoe has been degraded by a wide variety of nonpoint sources of sediment and algae-feeding nutrients. There is no one major source of pollutants affecting water quality and clarity. Instead, the cumulative impacts of many sources contribute to conditions that turn Tahoe's waters green with algae and cloud it with suspended sediments. It has been aptly described as the "thousand cuts" condition, killing clarity.

However, there is tantalizing evidence that this declining trend just may be reversing. Measurements over the last two seasons have demonstrated noticeable improvements in clarity. Does this mean the battle is won? Not yet. Until we see a more definitive improvement in clarity over a longer period, we must defer our victory speeches. We may be making steady progress uphill, but until we get to the top, it's only progress. We must maintain progress to succeed.

Since hundreds of sources affect the lake, hundreds of Environmental Improvement Program (EIP) projects are needed to heal the many cuts that have been inflicted on the watershed. Some projects are large and easy to see. Others are less noticeable, even invisible to the casual observer. One by one, each project is an investment in a cleaner lake and a sustainable future for Tahoe. One such project will be ready to implement in 2004 -- the Eagle Falls Trailhead Parking Area project, being conducted by the USDA Forest Service, Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit.

Along Highway 89 at Emerald Bay, the Eagle Falls Trailhead Parking Area is a highly popular starting point for day hikers and overnights going into the Desolation Wilderness. The Forest Service estimates that between 40,000 and 50,000 people use the location for trailhead parking and picnicking each year. It's a beautiful setting next to Eagle Creek, the waters

of which flow a short distance to Emerald Bay. And here lies the problem. Intense vehicle and foot traffic at Eagle Falls has resulted in negative effects on water quality. Soils in the picnic area next to the creek have become compacted, and erosion annually releases silts and sediments to the lake. When the parking area was originally constructed many years ago, the effects of polluted runoff were not taken into consideration, nor were the future needs of public transportation.

When the reconstruction of the Eagle Falls Trailhead Parking Area begins next spring, the work will enhance the recreational experience of the visitor, the environment, and the water quality of the location. The paving will be replaced and complemented with Best Management Practices (BMP) installations for runoff. The picnic area will be relocated and the stream bank quality enhanced, reducing erosion and allowing cleaner water to flow from Eagle Creek into Emerald Bay and Lake Tahoe. The work will require the closing of the parking area, but alternative footpaths will keep the popular trailhead open, even during reconstruction.

A new public transit turnaround and stop location will also be established to better accommodate present and future public transit needs. The restroom facility, nearing the end of its design life, will be replaced with a more efficient and accessible structure.

In the greater scheme of things at Lake Tahoe, this project alone will not make the lake noticeably cleaner or clearer. But remember, this is only one of hundreds of projects, each one healing one of those many little cuts in Tahoe's health and clarity. It also demonstrates how environmental projects can go hand in hand with recreation enhancements and transit improvements.



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