Major Changes to Aquatic Weed Management at Lake Tahoe: A Tale of Two Regulatory Agencies

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Abstract:

The development of the shoreline at South Lake Tahoe in the late 1960's to early 1970's led to the destruction of extensive natural marsh and wetland habitats that were replaced by dense, urban housing and marina development. Between the early 1970's and mid-1980's, aquatic plant growth within the marina areas created sufficient impacts to warrant use of mechanical harvesters to create navigable access to and from home owners' docks and Lake Tahoe. In 1995 and continuing to 2006, USDA-ARS conducted lake-wide aquatic plant surveys and documented the spread of Eurasian watermilfoil over the past 15 years, and the establishment of curlyleaf pondweed in 2003. Due to a long-standing regulatory prohibition against using any aquatic pesticides (including aquatic herbicides), attempts to manage this growing invasive weed problem have been limited to harvesting and minor efforts at physical removal. However, in the past 2 years (2007-2009), the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA) and the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board, with the urging of stakeholders, have begun to address this problem in concert with a wide range of state, federal and local government agencies. TRPA and LRWQCB together provide multi-state (CA/NV) environmental oversight through permitting processes. Both agencies have recently allocated resources to address aquatic invasive species for the first time, and most significantly in 2010, LRWQCB will propose changes in the "Basin Plan" that will allow for uses of certain aquatic pesticides (including aquatic herbicides) for control of invasive aquatic species. These changes in regulatory stance should greatly assist environmental mangers in their efforts to reduce the impact of existing AIS and in the continuing efforts to prevent the introduction and establishment of other species, including the quagga and zebra mussels, that would not doubt pose an extremely serious threat to Lake Tahoe's ecosystem and ability to sustain economic vitality from recreational activities.