

**Testimony for Julie W. Regan,
Chief of External Affairs & Deputy Director, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency**

Good morning Chairwoman McSally, Ranking Member Cortez Masto, and members of the subcommittee, I am Julie Regan, Chief of External Affairs and Deputy Director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. Our organization was formed by an interstate Compact between California and Nevada and ratified by Congress 50 years ago. Our mission is to protect Lake Tahoe, 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 induces a sense of majesty and is truly a national treasure.

I appreciate the opportunity to join this panel and address the subcommittee on the pressing issue of invasive species. Our spectacular lake faces serious threats from the spread of aquatic invasive species and in my brief time this morning, I'd like to share what we're doing to combat this environmental and economic hazard.

Lake Tahoe straddles the states of California and Nevada, high in the Sierra Nevada mountain range sitting at more than 6,200 feet of elevation. Nearly 80 percent of our land is owned by the federal government and managed by the U.S. Forest Service. Our small year-round population of 60,000 swells by 15 million people annually. While we're a snowsports destination, summer is actually our peak season as visitors flock to our beaches and outdoor recreational opportunities. Boating and other water sports are a time-honored tradition at Lake Tahoe and play a vital role in our region's \$5 billion annual economy.

When quagga mussels were first detected in Lake Mead, Nevada in 2007, our agency recognized the immediate threat to the lake, our drinking water supply, and economy. We mobilized to convene a 40-organization partnership to create a boat inspection program. This program has grown to be a national model, and to date, has prevented quagga mussels from entering Lake Tahoe. We have held this line by conducting nearly 90,000 mandatory watercraft inspections over the last 12 years with an unprecedented level of support from the boating community. We are united around a common understanding: should these invasive mussels take hold in Tahoe's waters, their impacts would be nothing short of catastrophic.

Invasive mussels starve native species of nutrients they need to survive. Both quagga and zebra mussels are prolific procreators, quickly accumulating on underwater surfaces, encrusting docks, boats, and drinking water infrastructure. Their razor-like shells can carpet shorelines, making walking barefoot on the beach virtually impossible.

We've had some close calls with quagga mussels over the years. One time our inspectors intercepted a boat infested with multiple invasives. An undetected crack in the boat's pontoon was allowing water to seep in. Inspectors found adult quagga and zebra mussels, and other aquatic

plants and snails – a glaring example of how easy it is for an unsuspecting boater to introduce these invaders into an ecosystem.

While powerboats get much of the attention, local kayakers, paddle boarders, and fishermen can also unintentionally introduce invasives. A local non-profit, the League to Save Lake Tahoe, sponsors an "Eyes on the Lake" program which incorporates citizen-based science, where paddlers can monitor while they recreate. The League, also known as "Keep Tahoe Blue" has trained more than 3,000 people to help protect our clear waters.

While the comprehensive programs we have in place at Tahoe are keeping new invasives out of our waters, unfortunately, other aquatic invaders entered decades ago. Invasive plants such as watermilfoil and curleyleaf pondweed are choking waterways in marinas and other shallow areas and a small bivalve called the Asian clam also litters our beaches. We have projects underway to treat these existing invasives before they ruin the entire lake. Over the last 10 years, our basin-wide partnership has treated nearly 90 acres, fully eradicating invasive plants in some areas. One of the largest projects actively underway is in an area called the Tahoe Keys. This 1,100 acre waterfront community is infested with invasive milfoil and curleyleaf pondweed creating serious environmental and human-health concerns. A collaborative stakeholder process is in the works to find solutions.

All of the programs I've mentioned are crucial to preventing and controlling aquatic invasive species at Lake Tahoe. Through the public-private partnership of our Environmental Improvement Program, we've brought funds to bear in this fight from federal, state, local, and private sources. A local non-profit called the Tahoe Fund has tapped private donors to support invasive species projects raising thousands of dollars to leverage public funds.

In 2016, Congress reauthorized the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act, delivering crucial federal leadership and funding that has been fully leveraged to maximize project impact. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is a key partner in the federal family, serving as the lead agency along with my organization for federal investment under the Restoration Act.

Lake Tahoe continues to set records for warming temperatures, making us even more vulnerable to invasive species. We will continue to rely on what we call "epic collaboration" to combat these threats in the future. As we like to say, we are all in this boat together. What we've accomplished thus far at Lake Tahoe demonstrates what is possible -- a collaborative proving ground for sound science and common sense policies. Realizing what is possible in the future demands that we continue to paddle in the same direction so that we can preserve Lake Tahoe -- what Mark Twain once famously called, "the fairest picture the whole world affords."

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