

Sierra Club Summary on Protecting Washoe Meadows State Park

Issue: A proposal to expand a golf course into Washoe Meadows State Park includes an unprecedented downgrade in state park land protections at a sensitive time when State Parks is chartered by the legislature to transform itself. California should be a leader in protection of land held in the Public Trust for its resource values. While purporting to remedy Upper Truckee River damage that is the consequence of the existing golf course, the proposed project represents a threat of development interests' holding sway to harm the state's natural, cultural and recreational resources.

Background

An emergency legislative statute in 1984 noted the land's unique and irreplaceable resources and its extreme value to the maintenance of the water quality of Lake Tahoe; subsequently the land was brought into state ownership and part was set aside as Washoe Meadows State Park. The park located near South Lake Tahoe comprises ~ 628 acres of forests, trails, meadows, river, fens and other wetlands, rare plants and wildlife.

A proposed river restoration project that would include golf course development in Washoe Meadows State Park was voted on by the State Park & Recreation Commission in October 2011; the vote had to be repeated in January 2012 as questions arose over the procedures used. A key part of the vote was the unprecedented, downgraded reclassification of state park land for the golf course expansion. Moreover, intensified scientific review has shown serious deficiencies in current restoration and golf course construction plans that could destabilize the river reach and impact sediment flow into Lake Tahoe. The massive excavation and land incursion would require the removal of hundreds of trees and would threaten the delicate hydrologic balance of the park's fens and wetlands that serve as sources for clarifying water that flows to Lake Tahoe.

Sierra Club Involvement

Founded in 2006 by Sierra Club members Bob and Grace Anderson, Washoe Meadows Community is a grassroots nonprofit organization and coalition of conservation groups, volunteer activists and supporters from across the state working to protect the natural, cultural and recreational resources of Washoe Meadows State Park near South Lake Tahoe. The Community also works to preclude the precedent of the downgrade for commercial purposes which could, subsequently, imperil parklands and natural resources throughout California.

Tahoe Area Sierra Club and the Mother Lode Chapter have been involved since the beginning, writing comment letters, speaking at public meetings and participating in meetings with elected officials, agencies and other conservation groups. The latter meetings have resulted in support from conservation groups including the California Native Plant Society, Defense of Place, Resource Renewal Institute, Planning & Conservation League, World Water and Climate Network as well as the Bear League. In 2017 the Sierra Club worked with the Center for Biological Diversity to submit an amicus brief for the Appeals court case in support of protecting Washoe Meadows. Sierra Club has also provided funding for the ongoing effort to protect Washoe Meadows State Park including support for technical experts.

Legal Timeline

Two lawsuits were filed by Washoe Meadows Community because of the two separate approvals of the project by State Parks. The court ruled in Washoe Meadows Community's favor on the first lawsuit and there was a ruling that gave Washoe Meadows Community the option to seek reimbursement of attorney's fees if we won the second lawsuit. A favorable ruling was obtained in the second lawsuit which was heard in Alameda County Court in 2015. On November 15, 2017 California's Court of Appeal issued an order upholding the April 2015 lower court ruling that directed State Parks to set aside their approvals of the project. State Parks filed a petition for a hearing at the CA Supreme Court. In January 2018 the Supreme Court declined to hear the petition. In June 2018 a settlement was reached regarding the attorneys' fees. Finally in October 2018 the California Park & Recreation Commission rescinded their approval of the project.

Current Status

In 2018 State Parks proposed a slightly modified project but the project still had significant environmental issues. State Parks issued a document and comments were due July 30. Sierra Club Tahoe Area Group and Mother Lode Chapter submitted comments as well as many other people and scientists. In an October 2018

meeting of the CA Park & Recreation Commission, the Commission discussed the new project but directed State Parks to review other project alternatives in light of the numerous comments from scientists and the community as well as potential legal challenges. Unfortunately, the Commission now seems to be going off track by proposing to hire a consultant to review the feasibility of options that include the long proposed moving of golf course into the park.

Alignment with Sierra Club Programs and Initiatives

We believe this endeavor to preserve a state park and develop a more sustainable project closely aligns with Sierra Club's "Our Wild America" campaign to protect lands held in the Public Trust. It supplements the work the Sierra Club is doing in California to influence decisions on the future of California's state parks. This Washoe Meadows effort comes at a critical juncture when the entire State Park management and planning system is under direction to transform itself based on recommendations from the Parks Forward Commission. Our strong stand against commercial interests is consistent with Sierra Club California's emphasis to the Parks Forward Commission and to the State Legislature that the Natural Resources Agency and its State Parks Department must stay true to the core values and mission to protect California's natural and cultural resources. Our actions are also supportive of the Sierra Club's initiatives to actively engage more diverse populations in the outdoors. These programs conflict with the proposed project which would emphasize and support a sport that social research reveals is not part of the recreational priorities for the new demographic of minorities and millennials.

Alternative project that Tahoe Area Group, Sierra Club supports

- Restoring the Upper Truckee River along the reach that has been degraded since the creation of the Lake Tahoe Golf Course along its banks. River restoration using advanced practices (current practices call for a lighter human touch and reliance on natural processes) would reduce fine sediment flowing into the lake while providing a riparian habitat.
- Preservation of resources in Washoe Meadows, which was established as a State Park in 1987 because environmental scientists determined that it holds valuable and scarce natural and cultural resources. Washoe Meadows provides affordable, year-round, dispersed recreation in a natural setting.

Accomplishments of the Efforts so Far

Through ten years of volunteer activism, legal measures and involvement of political leaders, economists and environmental scientists, we have thus far prevented the bulldozers' invasion of Washoe Meadows State Park with the deforestation and excavation that would devastate valuable habitat and world-renowned wetlands. Our coalition has defined a new, sustainable alternative to the current plan, and we continue to engage the public, media, and local civic leaders through park tours and clean-up events, articles, website, meetings and hearings. We have developed an alliance of park users and supporters across the state who believe that legislated protections of lands held in the Public Trust should not be violated. Washoe Meadows Community worked with the Sierra State Parks Foundation to host a second annual wildflower tour in the park to introduce members of the public to the park's natural resources. The Tahoe Area Sierra Club also hosted several tours of the fens led by a university expert on wetlands.

Washoe Meadows Community seeks a collaborative approach to resolving the project issues and will continue, with Sierra Club support, to further those efforts, through either discussions or continued litigation.

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