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Telephone Company to Remove Toxic Underwater Cable from Lake Tahoe

Pacific Bell ordered to remove 8 miles of lead-leaching abandoned telecom lines discovered by nonprofit

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, CA – Eight miles of leaded cable weighing an approximated 150,000 pounds was abandoned at the bottom of Lake Tahoe decades ago by AT&T's Pacific Bell Telephone Company. Below the Blue, a local nonprofit that is dedicated to removing foreign debris and investigating pollution problems, brought attention to the cable in 2020, and has been working diligently with PacBell's parent company to get the cable removed ever since.

Below the Blue is supportive of the recent settlement approved in federal court between the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance (CSPA) and Pacific Bell. As part of the agreement AT&T has agreed to remove the leaded telecommunications cable by 2022 as well as cover all costs for permitting and proper disposal.

The cable has been leaching toxic lead into the lake for decades. PacBell switched to fiber optic phone cables over 30 years ago and abandoned the old cables at the bottom of the lake. The cables contain approximately 3 pounds of lead per foot, and extend for 8 miles along the western shore of Lake Tahoe from Baldwin Beach to Rubicon Bay, including across the mouth of Emerald Bay. While removing trash from the bottom of the lake, founders of Below the Blue Seth Jones and Monique Rydel Fortner discovered the cables and brought it to the attention of CSPA.

The magnitude and impact of the cable cannot be understated. The discovery of the cable inspired the foundation of Below the Blue. As confirmed in the settlement, PacBell stopped using the cables over thirty years ago. Over several years, Jones and Fortner have been conducting independent investigations and followed the cable's underwater and above ground paths.

Signage dates to the original use of the cables as early as the 1930s. Testing has confirmed the presence of lead, with conservative estimates of over 60 tons. At the time of placement of the cables, long-term impacts of such metals in water was not well understood.

“Now that the risks of such contamination are known, it is unfathomable to continue exposing Lake Tahoe’s residents and millions of visitors to potential harm,” said Fortner.

Over the past decade, Jones and Fortner have performed thousands of dives in Lake Tahoe to remove foreign debris and raise awareness around pollution. Commercial, industrial and personal waste has been left undisturbed at the bottom of and throughout Lake Tahoe. Below the Blue is committed to slow the pace of pollution and be part of a growing movement around the Lake Tahoe Basin to remove debris from the lake and surrounding tributaries.

“This situation has been an exceptional example of what is possible when groups come together to make a positive impact. The settlement is a step in the right direction, but the risks to the environment won’t be mitigated until the cables are out,” said Fortner. “The hope is that a continuing partnership between all those involved will make removal and disposal a reality.”

Below the Blue has worked with local agencies, community organizations, the scientific community, and environmental lawyers in a collective effort to address this environmental and conservation issue. The local community, in particular the homeowners of Rubicon Bay, joined in the efforts to solicit for change. AT&T’s commitment to making a tangible impact is welcomed in spite of the original placement of the cables decades ago. Their leadership should be commended, and their respect for the local Lake Tahoe community acknowledged.

The settlement requires PacBell to begin the process of obtaining permits from state and local agencies to remove the cables. Afterwards, PacBell will put the removal process out for bid. If the permitting imposes conditions that push bids beyond \$1.5 million, CSPA and AT&T will need to reassess and avoid further litigation.

“Lake Tahoe is one of California’s iconic waterways,” said CSPA executive director Bill Jennings, “We are proud to provide this push to get toxic garbage out of the Lake.” In addition to CSPA, countless other organizations have positively influenced the situation, including the League to Save Lake Tahoe. The League, better known by their iconic slogan Keep Tahoe Blue, has a successful track record of solving tough environmental challenges at Tahoe. “We will continue to work with Below the Blue as watchdogs to make sure AT&T, Tahoe’s permitting agencies and others work together collaboratively to get the cables out of the lake as soon as possible,” said Jesse Patterson, Chief Strategy Officer for the League. “What’s crucial is getting the lead out of the water to avoid any further damage to our Jewel of the Sierra.”

Below the Blue is a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit dedicated to removing foreign debris from water bodies and to educating the public about the concerns surrounding pollution. Below the Blue collects hands-on data that helps facilitate policy change and enforcement while working closely with a team of environmental lawyers, local agencies and residents.

