

Nonprofits and public agency team up to tackle underwater construction debris at Lake Tahoe

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LAKE TAHOE, CA/NV -- Monique Rydel-Fortner and Seth Jones have seen more of what lies underwater at Lake Tahoe than most. Unfortunately, that includes trash and lots of it – from drones, car batteries and sunken boats, to plate glass windows and enormous sheets of metal siding. For more than a decade, the SCUBA divers and co-founders of the Tahoe-based nonprofit Below the Blue have removed more than 100,000 pounds of foreign objects from the Lake. Over countless dives, one source of submarine trash stands out as persistent but preventable – debris from shoreline building projects.

In cooperation with the League to Save Lake Tahoe and the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA), the underwater environmentalists are working to stop the illicit practice of using Lake Tahoe as a construction site dumpster.

“‘Out of sight, out of mind’ is not the answer for Tahoe. It’s a recipe for wrecking the Lake,” said Seth Jones, co-founder of Below the Blue. “Having shoreline homes, piers and recreational opportunities is a privilege that shouldn’t be abused by dumping trash in the Lake. Carelessly dropping a pair of sunglasses off the boat is one thing; intentionally pushing construction materials into the water is much more egregious. It’s up to the property owners and the construction crews to do better.”

Below the Blue has recovered building materials ranging from wood and Trex decking to electrical and hazardous waste at sites where homes and piers are being renovated or replaced. These items could only have found their way to the lake bottom by being dumped or left there once the work was complete.

Effective environmental protection of Lake Tahoe demands collaboration. Often, individuals or volunteers are the first to identify an environmental problem. The League to Save Lake Tahoe, also known as Keep Tahoe Blue, receives and follows up on reports from concerned citizens dozens of times each year. Below the Blue did much more than flag an environmental concern; they removed the underwater trash themselves, along with tabulating data on the types, amounts and locations of debris they hauled out of Tahoe’s waters.

The organization then brought the issue to the League whose team regularly gathers and uses environmental data to make a case for intervention by regulatory authorities. This process pioneered at Tahoe by the League is called “science to solutions,” and it has proved effective in strengthening

environmental protections. For example, League staff used litter data gathered at volunteer cleanup events to successfully lobby for local ordinances banning plastic bags and polystyrene containers.

For shoreline construction debris, TRPA clearly recognized the problem highlighted by the two nonprofits. The agency responded swiftly and decisively by strengthening its permit process for construction projects along Lake Tahoe's shoreline to manage the issue beforehand.

"Discarding material of any kind in Lake Tahoe is illegal and violates the high standard of environmental stewardship in this community," said Steve Sweet, Code Compliance Program Manager at TRPA. "Strengthening the requirements for shoreline construction permits will eliminate these careless and environmentally harmful practices to better protect Lake Tahoe."

As of January 1, 2022, the process for securing a shoreline construction permit requires the applicant to provide underwater visual documentation of the site prior to construction and once the project is complete. Prior to the recent change in permit language, TRPA code prohibited the disposal of construction material in the Lake, yet the permits lacked accountability measures to ensure construction debris wasn't discarded. Now, with a visual before and after record to reference, construction project applicants won't be allowed to shift the blame, and trash will be kept out of Tahoe's blue waters.

"If we hope to Keep Tahoe Blue, there's no place for litter in the Lake – whether it's a cigarette butt or a pile of rubble from a renovation project," said Jesse Patterson, Chief Strategy Officer for the League to Save Lake Tahoe. "The Lake can't protect itself. But with these new rules in place, there's no longer room to wriggle out of cleaning up the mess you made."

In addition to the new requirements for pre- and post-construction visual records, Below the Blue is working with TRPA to identify problem areas from past and ongoing construction projects, so that pollution can also be addressed.

In recent years, Tahoe's residents, visitors and public, private and nonprofit groups have come together like never before to preserve and protect the Lake's health and beauty. Keeping construction debris out of Big Blue's waters is an example of how collaboration is helping to Keep Tahoe Blue.

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Media resources: [Photos](#) – please credit "Below the Below"

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The League to Save Lake Tahoe, also known by its iconic slogan "Keep Tahoe Blue," is Tahoe's oldest and largest nonprofit environmental advocacy organization. Our team of solutions-oriented Tahoe advocates use innovation, boots-on-the-ground action, and a holistic approach to solve the environmental challenges threatening the lake we love. In our 65th year, we continue pushing to Keep Tahoe Blue in an ever-changing world. Learn more at keeptahoeblue.org.

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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. Learn more at belowtheblue.org.

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The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency leads the cooperative effort to preserve, restore, and enhance the unique natural and human environment of the Lake Tahoe Region, while improving local communities, and people's interactions with our irreplaceable environment. Visit trpa.gov to learn more.