

The Cables Leaking Lead in Lake Tahoe

Potential lawsuit claims four abandoned lines in Emerald Bay are toxic

Evan Dreyer grew up swimming in Lake Tahoe offshore his parent's vacation home in Rubicon Bay. For his entire childhood and thereafter, he had assumed the water was pristine. And he never gave a second thought to the pipe that lay five feet from the family's private dock.

"We thought it was a water pipe; I grew up looking at that pipe," the 32-year-old Orinda resident said. "We never thought anything was wrong. We had no clue."

But then Dreyer, whose parents have owned the home on Four Ring Road in Rubicon Bay since the early 1990s, said that during a visit to the family house this summer he saw a boat that looked to be "scientific" and waved it in. Dreyer, who sits on the boards of the Rubicon Mutual Water Company and the San Francisco Baykeeper, an environmental nonprofit that seeks to protect the San Francisco Bay and its tributaries, said he was curious what the watercraft was doing near there.

That's when Dreyer met Seth Jones, president of Marine Taxonomic Services, which does diving work for several Tahoe

and state agencies. Jones informed Dreyer that the pipe sitting on the property was not a water pipe, but an abandoned telecommunications cable.

He shared that this cable ran underwater for miles along the West Shore and into Emerald Bay. There are others, too, he said, and they're leaking lead into the lake. Dreyer said he was shocked.

Lead is a heavy metal known to be hazardous to humans, mammals, and fish. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, exposure to high levels of lead may cause anemia, weakness, as well as kidney and brain damage.

"At the end of the day, there are hundreds of people swimming there and no one knows," Dreyer said of the cable. "Any potential that it could make someone sick is the worst violation."



ABANDONED CABLE: Underwater in the depths of Tahoe lies this 7-mile cable that runs from Rubicon Bay to Baldwin Beach in South Lake Tahoe. The abandoned line sits on top of rocks. Photo courtesy Below the Blue

FINDING THE CABLE

In 2012, professional divers Jones and Monique Rydel-Fortner, an associate scientist for Marine Taxonomic Services, were doing work for Tahoe Regional Planning Agency laying tarps in Emerald Bay for an Asian clam control project. While diving and working their way up the shore, they saw a cable in the water and noticed it

sticking out of the sand. Jones took a piece to have it tested, noting it was covered in tar on the outside.

"We didn't know what was in them," said Jones, whose company specializes in water quality work, rehabilitation, and habitat monitoring.

What they found was that the cable consisted of several layers, including 27 strands of 0.25-inch

thick solid steel rod, three layers of twine, paper, solid-copper wire, and "a rolled 0.188-inch layer of lead," according to a 2018 letter MTS sent to several Lake Tahoe-based agencies to alert them about the situation.

"The cable is huge; it's hazardous," stated Rydel-Fortner, who has been diving since the 1990s. "We thought we would remove it, but realized it is a much bigger project ... There is contamination in the cable. It's not pure lead or copper; there is hazardous waste involved."

After more dives, Jones and Rydel-Fortner found even more cables, six in total. While two are still active, four are inactive and abandoned. Five go across the mouth of Emerald Bay, while one makes its way up the West Shore. Jones and Rydel-Fortner estimate the longest line is 7 miles long, but they would like to see all the abandoned cables removed from Lake Tahoe.

Two of the cables date back to 1929, installed by a telecommunications company currently owned by AT&T, and the other is a Sierra Pacific Power Company power cable currently owned by California Pacific Electric Company. One of the lines across Emerald Bay is 2,000 feet long.

POTENTIAL LAWSUIT

Concerned about the environmental ramifications, Jones and Rydel-Fortner were put in touch with Tahoe City-based attorney Kirk Boyd through a mutual friend. Once Boyd heard their concerns, he was on a mission to help them get the abandoned equipment removed from the lake.

Boyd and other lawyers tracked down the owners of the cable. After research and testing, it was determined there are 89,000 pounds of lead in the abandoned sections, with



TRASH DIVERS: Monique Rydel-Fortner and Seth Jones, professional divers who do work for local organizations and agencies, also pick up garbage they find in the waters of Lake Tahoe. In eight years, the duo has collected 16,000 pounds of trash. During their diving missions, they found cables that are leaking lead into the lake. Photo courtesy Below the Blue

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the heavy metal leaking from open ends. Boyd noted these exposed edges come from places the cables have been cut, that anchors drop on them in Emerald Bay, and that they are fraying from age.

"It's been in there so long that it is deteriorating," Boyd said. "These divers are heroes. If it weren't for them, [the cables] would continue to be seeping lead in the lake forever."

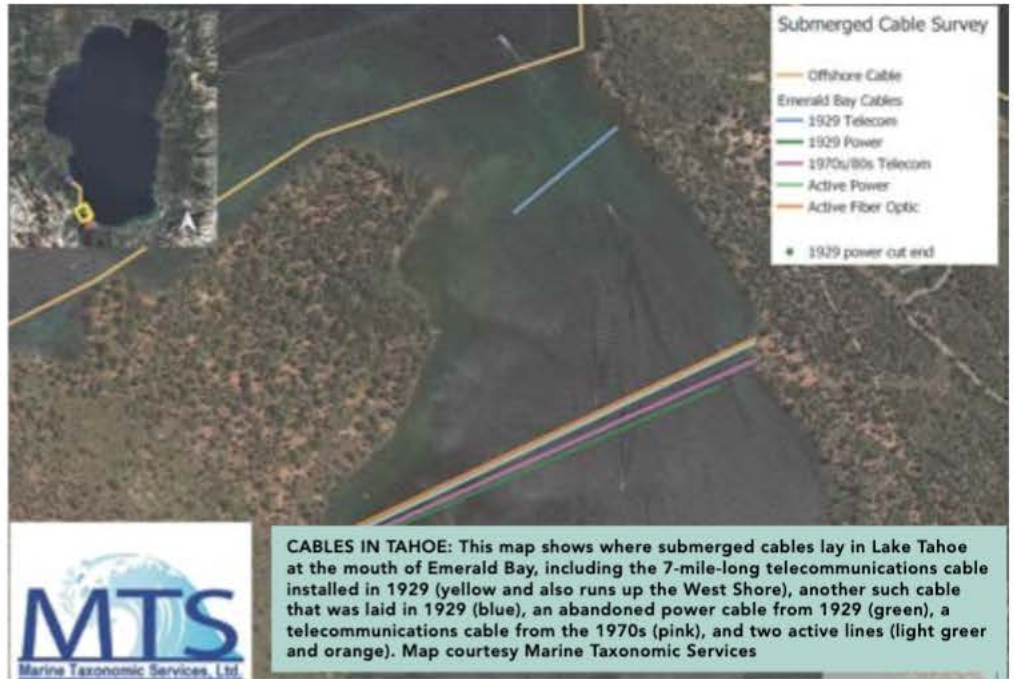
Testing was conducted on a section of one of the telecommunication cables in September to see how much lead is seeping into water. It showed there are 29 micrograms of lead per liter of water coming from the wire, according to Boyd. California law permits .5 micrograms per liter of water. The team is "pretty sure" the two energy lines are also leaking lead. They plan to do more testing soon.

"There is no doubt that it is in excess," Boyd said. "[AT&T] left their garbage in the lake and that's reason enough to take it out; plus, it's leaking lead."

Boyd and three other attorneys sent a letter of intent to sue on Aug. 6 to AT&T, Sierra Pacific Power Company, and California Pacific Electric Company. Boyd said the entities have up to 90 days to respond. He intends to file the lawsuit later this month, but said his goal is to have the cables removed. He stated he has spoken to the companies' lawyers.

"So far, they have not agreed to pull up the cable," said Boyd, noting the lawyers have claimed turbidity is an issue.

Turbidity happens when something is buried and has to be dug up,



creating silt. The measure of turbidity is a key test of water quality, which is an important factor in Lake Tahoe. However, Boyd said the cable is lying on rocks and not buried in the ground.

"I am hoping AT&T does the right thing, then we don't have to sue them," Boyd said. "If they pull up the cable, then we can get on with our lives."

AT&T, for its part, is looking into the issue.

"These are very old cables and we are investigating to determine who owns them" Jim Kimberly, AT&T spokesperson, wrote to *Moonshine Ink* in an email. "We will take appropriate action as the facts become known."

Tahoe Marina and Excavating Owner Matt Daniels would be willing to remove the cables, which he said are each 4 inches in diameter. His business has barges that could be used, but motorized spools and divers to lift the cable would be needed, he said. Daniels, who has been in business since 1979, estimates the job would cost "thousands of dollars," but was not exact on the details of such a mission.

"I love doing things that help the lake," said Daniels, who has pulled several things out of the waters, including a plane. "If it's lead, it needs to come out."

BIRTH OF A NONPROFIT

Having the remnant equipment removed from the lake is just the first step for Jones and Rydel-Fortner, who have been diving in Lake Tahoe for eight years. They hope to set a precedent to have such cables cleared away elsewhere, noting that companies "haven't been forced to remove cables" from bodies of water across the U.S. The duo is also in the process of forming a nonprofit, Below the Blue, which looks to inform, educate, identify, and empower the community about the garbage issue in Lake Tahoe.

"We want to try to really go big," Rydel-Fortner said. "There's a lot of work to do."

They have already collaborated with agencies to put together a project where local students make art out of the 16,000 pounds of trash they have collected. An art show was scheduled for Boatworks Mall in Tahoe City this summer but had to be delayed due to COVID-19.

The main goal for the moment, though, is to remove the leaking cables from Big Blue.

"We want to educate and make people aware," Rydel-Fortner said. "People care. They just don't know."

~ For more information about Below the Blue, visit belowtheblue.org. (P)



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