

Safeguarding the shorezone: Decision to protect the lake from buoy encroachment could be overturned

By Nicole Gergans, Environmental Program Advocate for the League to Save Lake Tahoe

The League to Save Lake Tahoe expresses appreciation to the TRPA Governing Board for its August decision not to allow the extension of the buoy line farther out into Lake Tahoe's precious waters. Unfortunately, a reconsideration vote was requested, and if the decision is overturned, the consequences to Lake Tahoe's shorezone could be severe.

The amendment will nearly double the width of the shorezone that individual buoys can occupy. Current regulations allow individual buoys to be placed up to 350 feet from the lake's high-water mark. However, the proposed amendment will permit these buoys to be located up to 600 feet out into the lake.

Furthermore, major exceptions would be granted, including allowing buoys to extend to 1,050 feet in a Tahoe City location, tripling what is allowed compared to current regulations. It is expected that many more exceptions to the rule will be granted and, over time, buoys will creep farther and farther out into this national treasure.

The consequences from this change are complex and significant, yet the TRPA has declined to complete a comprehensive environmental analysis of the impacts. This proposed change would very likely create navigation and safety hazards, generate dangerous recreational user conflicts, affect scenic standards, and produce disturbance to the lake bottom.

By extending the buoy line to 600 feet (the same line as the No Wake Zone), swimmers, kayakers, paddleboarders, top-line fishermen, and outrigger canoeists will be deprived of a designated area within the No Wake Zone free of navigation obstacles. Those who prefer to travel outside the buoy line will be forced into the unsheltered area beyond the No Wake Zone where numerous safety concerns may arise, such as collisions with high-speed boats and wave inundation.

Additionally, the scenic views and high-quality experience of boaters, beach-goers, and hikers will be degraded as a larger slice of the visual landscape will be cluttered with buoys.

The TRPA is claiming that this amendment will result in less substrate disturbance, as non-compliant buoys located outside the 350-foot buoy line would not need to be moved. Yet, TRPA is not looking at the whole picture, as this amendment would allow buoys conforming to existing location standards to be relocated to deeper waters, thus creating the potential for drastically more substrate disturbance. Disturbance to substrate can impact both fisheries and water quality.

Thankfully, some members of the Governing Board recognized that significant environmental damage could potentially result by extending the buoy line, and therefore such changes could not be approved without first conducting a thorough environmental analysis of the proposed action.

The League remains hopeful that the Governing Board will not overturn its original decision, and encourages members of the public to express their opinions to the TRPA. The reconsideration vote is slated for Sept. 23 at the North Tahoe Conference Center.