

Mono County Community Development Department

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July 11, 2023

To: Mono County Board of Supervisors

From: Wendy Sugimura, Director

Re: Walker Basin Conservancy Program Updates

RECOMMENDED ACTION

None; informational only. Provide any desired direction to staff.

FISCAL IMPACT

None at this time.

BACKGROUND

Walker Lake is a salty terminal lake, similar to Mono Lake, in Nevada at the end of the Walker River which begins in the Sierra Nevada Mountains and runs through Antelope Valley and Bridgeport Valley (for a map, please visit <https://webapps.usgs.gov/walkerbasinhydromapper/#home>). During the last quarter of the 19th century, farmers and ranchers established communities in the Walker Basin and natural flows from the Walker River were diverted to support hay, pasture and other irrigated crops. As a result of declining water levels, the salinity of Walker Lake has increased dramatically to the point that the general health of the ecosystem is at risk and the lake can no longer support its native fish and wildlife populations.

In 2009, the Walker Basin Restoration Program was established by Public Law 111-85 for the primary purpose of restoring and maintaining Walker Lake, funded by the Desert Terminal Lakes Fund which Congress established for the benefit of at-risk natural desert terminal lakes and associated riparian and watershed resources. In 2012, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) and Mono County entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in response to concerns about the impact of potential water lease or sale programs dedicated to raising the level of Walker Lake (see Attachment 1). The MOU established that the Mono County Board of Supervisors will review, comment upon, and consider approving a proposal prior to appropriation of any funds by NFWF for the lease or purchase of land, water appurtenant to the land, or related interests for Walker Lake restoration.

In 2015, NFWF provided a grant award to Mono County to develop a water lease or transfer program proposal and conduct environmental review under CEQA. The project had various starts and stops related to grant scope changes, staffing challenges, interruption by COVID, and ultimately an administrative draft of the program and Environmental Impact Report were available with contract staff secured to complete the project, but the funding was no longer available through NFWF. However, the MOU provisions remain in place.

Concurrently in 2015, the Walker Basin Conservancy (WBC; <https://www.walkerbasin.org/>) was established to lead the effort to restore Walker Lake. The WBC works to restore and maintain Walker Lake while protecting agricultural, environmental, and recreational interests throughout the Walker Basin, and has entered into water transfer agreements that include management of the associated resources and economic impacts.

These programs have been developed along separate but parallel tracks, and the WBC's work provides new context and information that was not previously available when the original MOU was established. Therefore, the purpose of this agenda item is to introduce the Walker Basin Conservancy and their work.

DISCUSSION

According to the Walker Basin Conservancy's (WBC's) 10-year report

(<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/550a1fc8e4b0e1de27f15703/t/61b8e51632b0eb4c0fbb2400/1639507224245/WBC-10+Year+Report-TB70-Final-LowRes.pdf>), the WBC is passionate about reversing the collapse of Walker Lake and strives to balance agricultural interests, wildlife needs, cultural activities, and recreational use, while creating sustainable landscapes. Conservancy staff work alongside AmeriCorps National Service Members to accomplish on-the-ground restoration goals. AmeriCorps is a national service program that provides opportunities for young adults and new professionals to learn conservation principles and develop new skills while completing valuable service projects on our public lands.

The WBC's stewardship includes efforts such as native plant revegetation, noxious weed control, and streambank stabilization to improve habitat for important species like sage grouse and Lahontan cutthroat trout. They also benefit the local community by decreasing wildfire risk, suppressing dust, and preventing erosion while keeping the local agricultural economy strong.

The WBC's Executive Director, Peter Stanton, will provide the Board with an overview of the Conservancy's accomplishments and programs, as well as the results of water transfer projects and management (see Attachment 2).

ATTACHMENTS:

1. NFWF and Mono County Memorandum of Understanding
2. Walker Basin Conservancy presentation slides