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The Coalition to Save Walker Lake fact sheet

Motto: Save Walker Lake, Nevada's International Treasure

Mission Statement: Save Walker Lake as a valuable wildlife habitat and recreation area by securing a permanent and sustainable water source to maintain water quality for native wildlife.

Story:

For years, Tracie Martindale of Hawthorne, Nev., has brought her kids to Walker Lake to fish. They vie for the big Lahontan trout, and they look for the little tui chub. They visit the lake during bird season and look for loons and grebes. But Tracie wonders where her grandkids will go to fish. She has watched the water levels drop. She's seen the lake get saltier and saltier. The trout used to live here naturally, but they've had to be stocked for years now.

For thousands of years, Walker Lake has supported a unique web of life that produced trophy-sized trout. Lack of water is threatening the native fishery and related ecosystem including thousands of migratory birds. Without emergency action, Walker Lake will become a dead sea. As the lake dries up, so will local businesses that rely on tourism to the area.

About Walker Lake:

Born high in the Sierra Nevada, Walker Lake is the terminus for the Walker River watershed – an oasis amid arid land, located in west central Nevada on U.S. Highway 95, about 85 miles southeast of Reno.

Walker Lake is a relic from the ice age. It is one of only a few lakes in the world that have deep, cold water, where higher saline content reduces biodiversity and focuses productivity on a few highly-specialized species. This gives the lake international significance and the ability to produce trophy-sized Lahontan cutthroat trout.

Walker Lake's water level has dropped by more than 130 feet in the last 100 years due to upstream diversions of over-allocated Walker River water for agriculture and a poorly functioning watershed that reduces water capture and stream flow. The local irrigation district is made up of more than 2,000 users, who take water from the river pursuant to a federal court decree entered in 1936, without adequate, comprehensive conservation measures such as lined canals, water meters, etc.

The watershed also is invaded with thirsty, non-native tamarisk (salt cedar). Unpredictable Sierra snowfall, drought and natural evaporation compound the problem of reduced water.

As water levels dropped, salinity increased to levels perilous to microorganisms and fish that support the food chain. In the 1950s, Walker Lake was popular with anglers as one of only a few Sacramento perch fisheries. By the 1960s, these fish reached their tolerance for dissolved salts and they died out along with commercially fished carp.

Today, the lake remains a popular fishery for stocked LCT, which is listed as threatened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

However, the native tui chub fishery is at risk due to rising salinity and declining lake levels. Both the trout and the birds rely on tui chub for subsistence. Nevada Division of Wildlife studies show that the tui chub was not able to reproduce this year. Salinity levels are now at 13,800 ppm. Wildlife biologists warn that if salinity levels reach 14,500 ppm, many microorganisms and all fish will die. Scientists estimate without an influx of fresh water, Walker Lake could reach these toxic salinity levels by this spring.

Loss of the fishery would jeopardize tourism in Mineral County that could result in up to a 40 percent loss to the economy. Maintaining tourism in the county is one way to stop the downward economic spiral to keep the county off state assistance, says Ron Wolven, Director of Mineral County Economic Development Authority.

An important bird habitat would also be lost without the fishery. Walker Lake is a stopover for 1,200 to 1,400 common loons during their migration between Mexico and Canada. Other birds that rely on the lake's ecosystem include the American white pelican, snowy plovers, long-billed curlews, double crested cormorants and white-faced ibis.

Loss of the wildlife habitat also will degrade an important cultural symbol. Since time immemorial, the lake has been the heart of the Walker River Paiute Tribe. Historically, this tribe relied heavily on LCT as their food source and called themselves *agai dicutta* or "trout eaters." Later, at the behest of the U.S. government, the Paiutes became farmers.

Conservationists, anglers, farmers, business owners and area residents are uniting as the Coalition to Save Walker Lake by identifying emergency relief measures as well as long-term solutions.

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The Coalition to Save Walker Lake: Who we are

- Walker Lake Working Group
- Nevada Wildlife Federation
- Toiyabe Chapter of the Sierra Club
- Friends of Nevada Wilderness
- Red Rock Audubon Society
- Nevada Conservation League
- Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada
- Friends of Pyramid Lake
- Public Resource Associates
- Lahontan Audubon society
- Mineral County
- Mineral County Economic Development Authority
- Patagonia
- National Wildlife Federation
- Endangered Species Coalition
- The Wilderness Society
- Mono Lake Committee
- Planning and Conservation League of California