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Walker Lake Receives Water for Restoration Purposes for the First Time

Walker Basin Conservancy successfully sent water to Walker Lake over the Fourth of July weekend.

Walker Lake, Nev.—After years of collaborative efforts by the Walker Basin Conservancy and its partners, water rights acquired for the primary purpose of restoring Walker Lake flowed into the lake for the first time on July 5, 2019. This is a critical milestone for restoration goals at Walker Lake that include the eventual reintroduction of the threatened Lahontan cutthroat trout.

In 2010, 7.745 cubic feet per second (cfs) of Walker River Decree water rights were acquired under the authority of the Walker Basin Restoration Program (Program), now being implemented by the Conservancy for the benefit of the Walker River and Walker Lake. On May 22, 2018 the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals approved the Nevada State Engineer’s approval of the Program’s water right change application #80700. The application requested a change in beneficial use from irrigation for agriculture to instream flow for wildlife benefit for the consumptive use portion of the 7.745 cfs from the Yerington Weir to Walker Lake.

On April 16, 2019 the Federal District Court formally modified the Walker River Decree to conform to the water right change and marked the first time water acquired via the Program can be protected instream for the benefit of Walker Lake.

“We are thrilled that a portion of our Program water is protected and will remain instream until it reaches Walker Lake. This is an exciting milestone for everyone who has dedicated time to restoring Walker Lake,” said Jeff Bryant, Executive Director of Walker Basin Conservancy. “We have successfully mapped the path forward and will continue to engage with stakeholders to ensure the rest of our water portfolio is protected instream to Walker Lake.”

To date, approximately 43% of the water needed to reach targeted restoration goals at Walker Lake has been acquired. The Conservancy is actively working with willing sellers to reach those goals in order for the lake to support key native wildlife species once again.

The Conservancy has an agreement with the Walker River Paiute Tribe (WRPT) and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to monitor Program water as it mixes with the WRPT’s water through the Reservation to Walker Lake. The Lower Walker River Conveyance Protocol tool (LWRCP), with technical support from U.S. Geological Survey, was jointly developed by the WRPT, BIA and the Program in January 2014. The LWRCP tool is used by the parties to determine the amount of Program water that is in Weber Reservoir at any given time, how long that water has been in the Reservoir, and the amount being released from the Reservoir to Walker Lake. This process protects both the Tribe’s water rights and the Program water.

“The partnership between the Walker River Paiute Tribe, BIA and the Conservancy is a vital component to reaching restoration goals at Walker Lake,” said Amber Torres, Chairman of the Walker River Paiute Tribe. “We all have a shared interest in reviving the fishery at the lake and the LWRCP tool is a product of that interest.”

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About Walker Basin Conservancy: The Walker Basin Conservancy (Conservancy) is leading the effort to restore and maintain Walker Lake while protecting agricultural, environmental and recreational interests in the Walker River Basin. The Conservancy manages thousands of acres of land in the Basin and oversees revegetation activities, habitat enhancement and ongoing research. The Conservancy protects and monitors acquired water resources to ensure that they are used as intended for riparian and watershed stewardship and to increase stream flows to Walker Lake.

In 2017, the Conservancy accepted the lead role in implementing the Walker Basin Restoration Program (Program), previously administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. The Program was established by Public Law 111-85 (2009).

About Walker Lake: Walker Lake is a natural lake located in the geographic low point of the Walker River Basin and is the terminus of the Walker River. Decades of water diversions have resulted in declining water levels and dramatic increases in Total Dissolved Solids (TDS) to a level where Walker Lake can no longer support native fish or waterfowl. The Walker Basin Conservancy is working to acquire and protect enough water to reintroduce a stable population of Lahontan cutthroat trout, and other keystone species, in Walker Lake.

