



March 23, 2021

U.S. Forest Service
Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit
Attn: Michael Gabor
35 College Drive
South Lake Tahoe, CA 96150

Dear Mr. Gabor,

The Friends of the West Shore (FOWS) appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the Proposed Action for the Basin Wide Trails Analysis Project. (Proposed Action). FOWS mission is to work toward the preservation, protection, and conservation of the West Shore, our watersheds, wildlife, and rural quality of life, for today and future generations. FOWS represents community interests from Emerald Bay to south of Tahoe City.

Our comments, concerns, and recommendations focus on the following topics:

- Inadequate enforcement
- Potential increase in user conflicts
- Purpose and Need for project
- Backcountry Management Areas
- Environmental impacts

Detailed comments follow including questions and recommendations for consideration in the Environmental Assessment (EA).

Thank you for considering these comments. We look forward to review and discussion of the Environmental Analysis.

Sincerely,

Judith Tornese,
President

Jennifer Quashnick,
Conservation Consultant

Enforcement:

One of our primary concerns with the Proposed Action is the failure to address the need for proper enforcement. The USFS proposes to rely on design, pullouts, education, and signage to encourage self-enforcement and provide public safety. During the 3/10 public webinar, the following information was relayed:

- The USFS is aware that there is already illegal use of existing non-motorized trails by e-bikes as well as illegal use of the Pacific Crest Trail by bikes.
- The USFS only has two enforcement officers for the entire Basin and no plans to increase staff.
- The USFS is aware that signage is not sufficient; in fact, it was noted that signs warning that e-bikes are not allowed on the Tahoe Rim Trail are often damaged or removed within days of being posted.
- The Proposed Action will increase the number of users on forest trails.
- More users will no doubt lead to more user conflicts.
- The Proposed Action does not include any increases in active enforcement.

We find it surprising that even as the USFS recognizes that there are not enough enforcement resources to address existing levels of use, that the Proposed Action will lead to increased use of trails, and that public education and signage are not enough, the USFS has no plan to increase enforcement. Allowing more users on trails knowing it will lead to increased illegal use, user conflicts, and public safety impacts, without including meaningful mitigation measures is not responsible stewardship of public lands or safety. The Proposed Action **must** include mechanisms that will increase enforcement and monitoring of trail use.

Recommendations:

- The Proposed Action must provide for increased monitoring and enforcement. Without this, the EA cannot conclude “less than significant impacts” to the recreation experiences of different users, public safety, and environmental health.
 - While we understand there are limited resources available to hire new personnel, if additional enforcement staff are included as required mitigation in the Proposed Action, this would support USFS efforts to seek funding for additional officers.
 - The USFS should work with outside organizations/funding entities to explore options to increase enforcement resources.
 - Other measures could be explored, including user fees for e-bikes, parking fees and/or donations at popular trails (specifically for enforcement), etc.
- The Proposed Action should include a plan for selected monitoring of popular trails during peak use; not only would this provide enforcement, but officers could also collect user information to help guide future planning, funding, and enforcement actions.
- The Proposed Action should evaluate ‘phases’ for allowing e-bikes that are tied to monitoring and enforcement. For example, the USFS could initiate an initial phase that would allow a limited number of trails/miles where e-bikes would be allowed and conduct targeted monitoring and enforcement of those areas. Based on usage, the USFS could then adjust future phases to eventually allow the use of e-bikes on additional trails, up to the maximum amount analyzed in the EA for the Proposed Action.
- Although enforcement officers have additional authorities to address illegal use, we recommend the consideration of a volunteer program wherein the public can sign up to spend time on a given trail and inform users about allowed uses, trail etiquette, etc. While volunteers would not have

any authority to issue fines/etc., the face-to-face contact is likely to deter at least some level of illegal use, plus it will improve efforts to educate the public about trail use.

User Conflicts:

User conflicts between hikers, equestrians, mountain bikers, and e-bikers pose public safety and recreation concerns on shared trails. While it is typically a minority of trail users whom do not follow the rules or behave dangerously, the Proposed Action will lead to an increase in user conflicts. These may range from negatively impacting enjoyment of trail use to more serious conflicts, such as accidents that lead to injuries or worse.

Recommendations:

- The EA must assess the potential for increased user conflicts and include mitigation to address those impacts. Naturally, a key component includes adequate enforcement, as discussed above.
- Other mechanisms include, but are not limited to:
 - Separating hiking and biking trails, where feasible; and
 - Designating trail usage based on the proportion of users (for example, if 95% of a trail's use comes from hikers, it may not be appropriate to open that trail to e-bike users; alternatively, where trails have a large percentage of use by mountain bikers, it may be more appropriate to allow e-bikes on those trails, allowing for hikers and equestrians who want to avoid user conflicts to choose other trails).
- If mitigation such as adequate enforcement can't be provided, then for safety reasons, mixed use by hikers, equestrians, mountain and e-bikers should not be increased.

Purpose and Need:

We do not have a position for or against allowing e-bikes on USFS trails, however we do believe that any changes should be based on sufficient data regarding demand, user demographics, impacts on recreation experience, fair-share distribution, environment, and public safety. We agree it is important to periodically assess user trends and preferences, however we are concerned the Proposed Action includes a very specific focus that may or may not reflect the desires of a notable proportion of forest users. We would like to see the statistics and user information which guided the Proposed Action.

2016 Land Management Plan (LMP):

The Proposed Action states: *"To bring our management practices more in alignment with Subpart B of the TMR and move towards desired conditions for recreation in our 2016 Land Management Plan (Forest Plan), the LTBMU needs to consider a recreation strategy that provides e-bike access to National Forest lands, while protecting and maintaining highly valued scenery and natural resources."* While the Forest Plan does include requirements related to assessing recreation trends,¹ there is no specific requirement to consider a recreation strategy that "provides e-bike access" to National Forest Lands. The stated Need for Action results in the dismissal of any alternative that does not provide e-bike access because it will be said to not meet the purpose and need of the project. The Need for Action should reflect the requirements

¹ E.g. "As recreation trends and user preferences change, recreation facilities and opportunities are adapted to provide intended user experiences while being compatible with management goals." (LMP, page 62)

of the 2016 LMP, which require the USFS to periodically assess user trends, preferences, and to adapt facilities and opportunities that are compatible with user experiences and management goals.²

The Proposed Action should appropriately reflect this requirement so the project may allow for consideration of alternatives that do not include e-bikes. Whether one is for or against allowing e-bikes on existing non-motorized trails, the environmental and recreational impacts of different options must be evaluated by the EA in order to provide sufficient review of the benefits or consequences of the project and mitigation measures that would be necessary to reduce impacts to “less than significant”.

Recreational Demand for E-bike usage:

In addition, the Proposed Action does not include any information regarding the ‘demand’ for allowing e-bike access on USFS lands. For example, the public has no idea whether this demand is coming from 1% or 30% of users, and/or what the demand level is for paved versus unpaved trails. Also, what are the demographics of e-bike users? We heard several comments from older members of the public who need the e-bike assistance to allow continued use of trails as they age. Usage and impacts will be quite different from younger or more aggressive e-bike users who are apt to push limits (and speeds). It is important to understand where the demand is coming from, for what type of use and trails (unpaved, paved, location, etc.), and the demographics of those who will increase their use of e-bikes as that will have an effect on the recreational, safety, and environmental impacts of the project.

Further, there has been no information provided detailing the demand for e-bike usage of paved trails or unpaved trails. The impacts and expectations of unpaved trail users are quite different than paved trail users.

Fair-share Distribution:

As noted below, the Proposed Action should recognize the proportion of users who desire each type of recreation activity and plan accordingly. For example, the experience of 95% of a user type shouldn’t be negatively impacted in order to favor the other 5%.

Levels of trail use by all users:

As the 2016 LMP directs the USFS to periodically consider user trends and preferences, we believe any basin-wide analysis of trail use should also analyze existing use by all types of recreation (and most notably, over-use of popular trails) and analyze opportunities to mitigate impacts to the environment and recreation experience. For example, peak-period parking management/reservations were identified as one option to address the traffic impacts of visitation at Emerald Bay in the SR 89 Corridor Plan; such strategies would also assist in limiting the number of users on popular trails at any one time, improving the experience of those who see the beauty and peace of being in nature with fewer crowds.

Recommendations:

- The Proposed Action should appropriately reflect the 2016 LMP requirements, which focus on assessing trends and other factors and adjusting accordingly. The LMP does not call for the USFS to specifically require e-bikes. Other alternatives must be analyzed.

² For example, the Recreation Opportunities Strategies include: “As recreation trends and user preferences change, recreation facilities and opportunities are adapted to provide intended user experiences while being compatible with management goals.” (LMP, p. 62)

- The USFS needs to present the data behind the ‘demand’ for e-bike use, as well as the demand and usage information for all existing uses (e.g. hiking, equestrian use, mountain biking) so that the public and decisionmakers can see what the existing recreation trends are, anticipated future usage, and ensure a Proposed Action that fairly meets those trends.
- The EA needs to analyze the recreation experience expectations and impacts and environmental effects of allowing e-bikes on paved trails versus unpaved trails.

Backcountry Management Areas:

Several of the areas and trails where e-bikes are proposed for use are designated Backcountry Management Areas (BMAs). The LMP describes these areas as: *“On these lands, natural ecological processes are primarily free from human influences. The landscape is predominantly shaped by natural processes and disturbance events such as vegetative succession, fire, insects attack, disease outbreak, and floods. Scenic integrity is high; the valued landscape character appears intact.”* (p. 76). We question whether allowing e-bikes in these areas is compatible with the BMA designation. Images showing the BMA designations along the West Shore are attached.

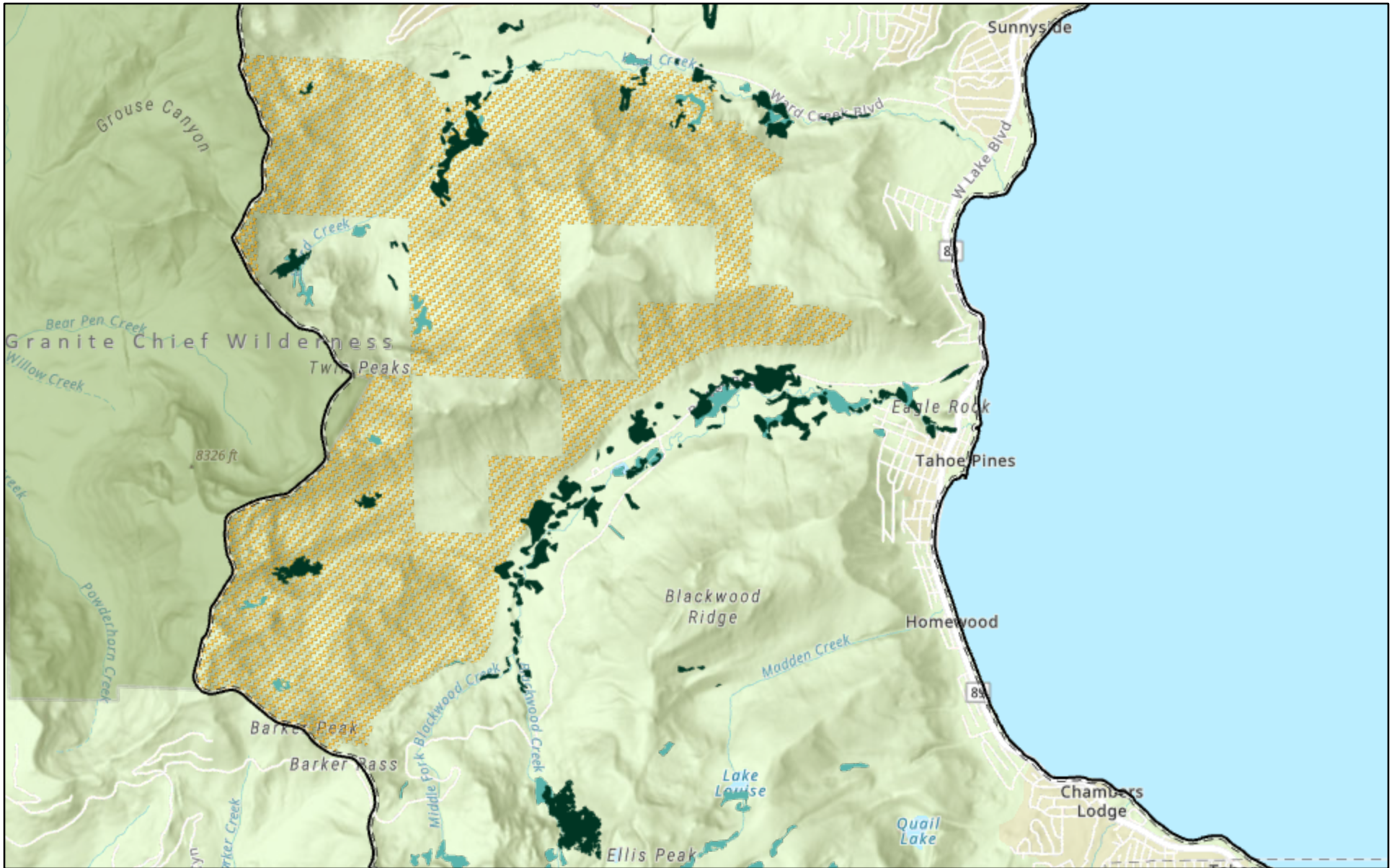
Recommendations:

- The EA must disclose where the proposal would allow e-bikes and other motorized uses within BMAs and analyze the compatibility of e-bike usage with the BMA designation.
- An alternative that does not include allowing e-bikes in BMAs should be analyzed.

Environmental impacts:

The EA must assess the environmental impacts of the Proposed Action on the USFS Desired Conditions and the TRPA Environmental Threshold Carrying Capacities. Impact areas include, but are not limited to, wildlife habitat, forest health, water quality and runoff, soil erosion, noise, and recreation experience.

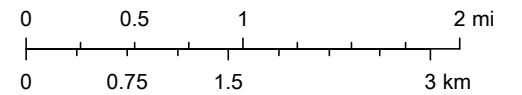
Lake Tahoe West Project Map



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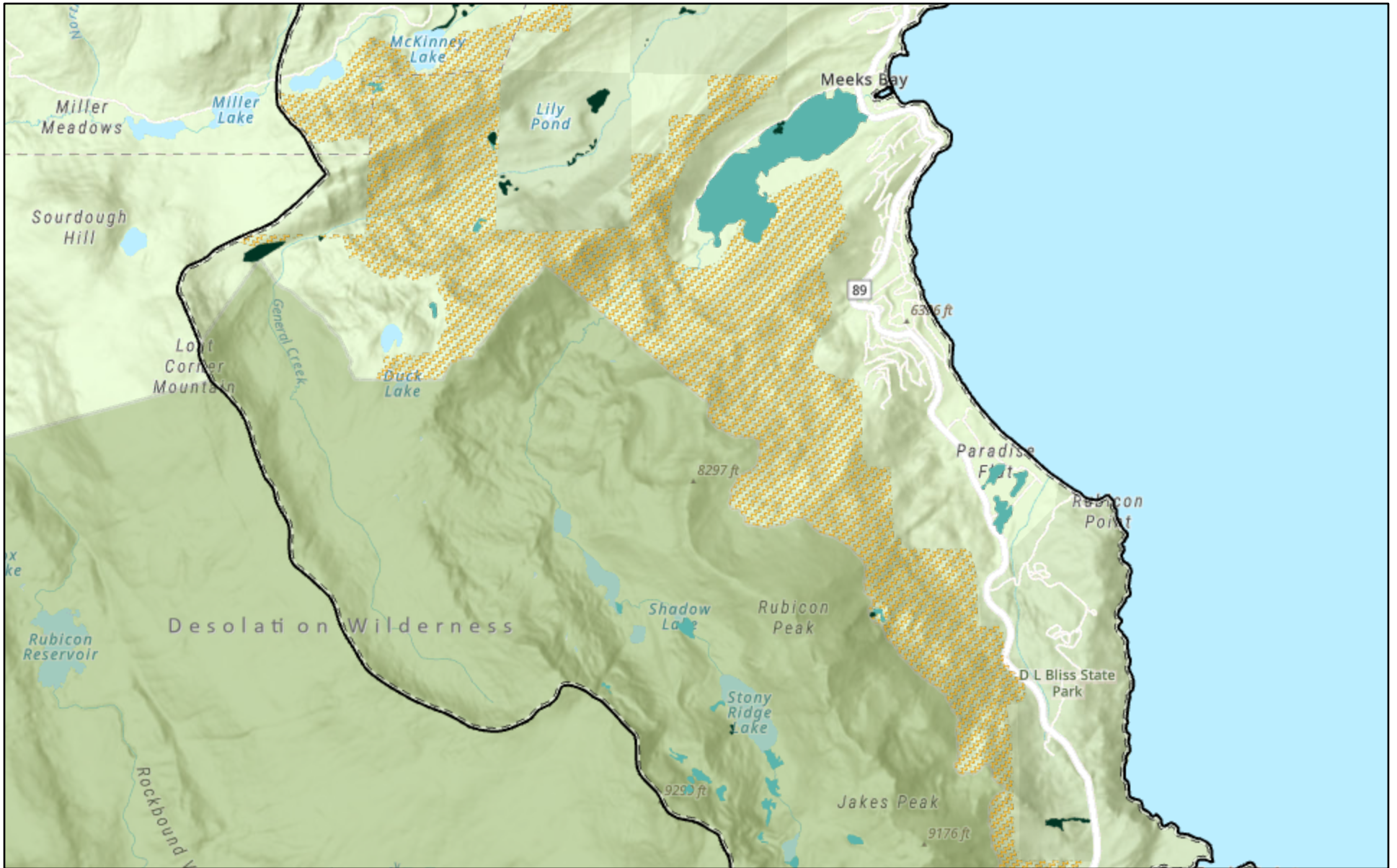
-  Backcountry
-  Meadow
-  Project Area
-  Wilderness
-  Aspen

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TRPA, Esri, NASA, NGA, USGS, FEMA

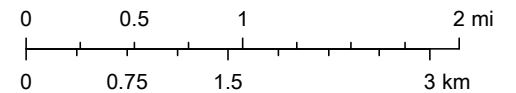
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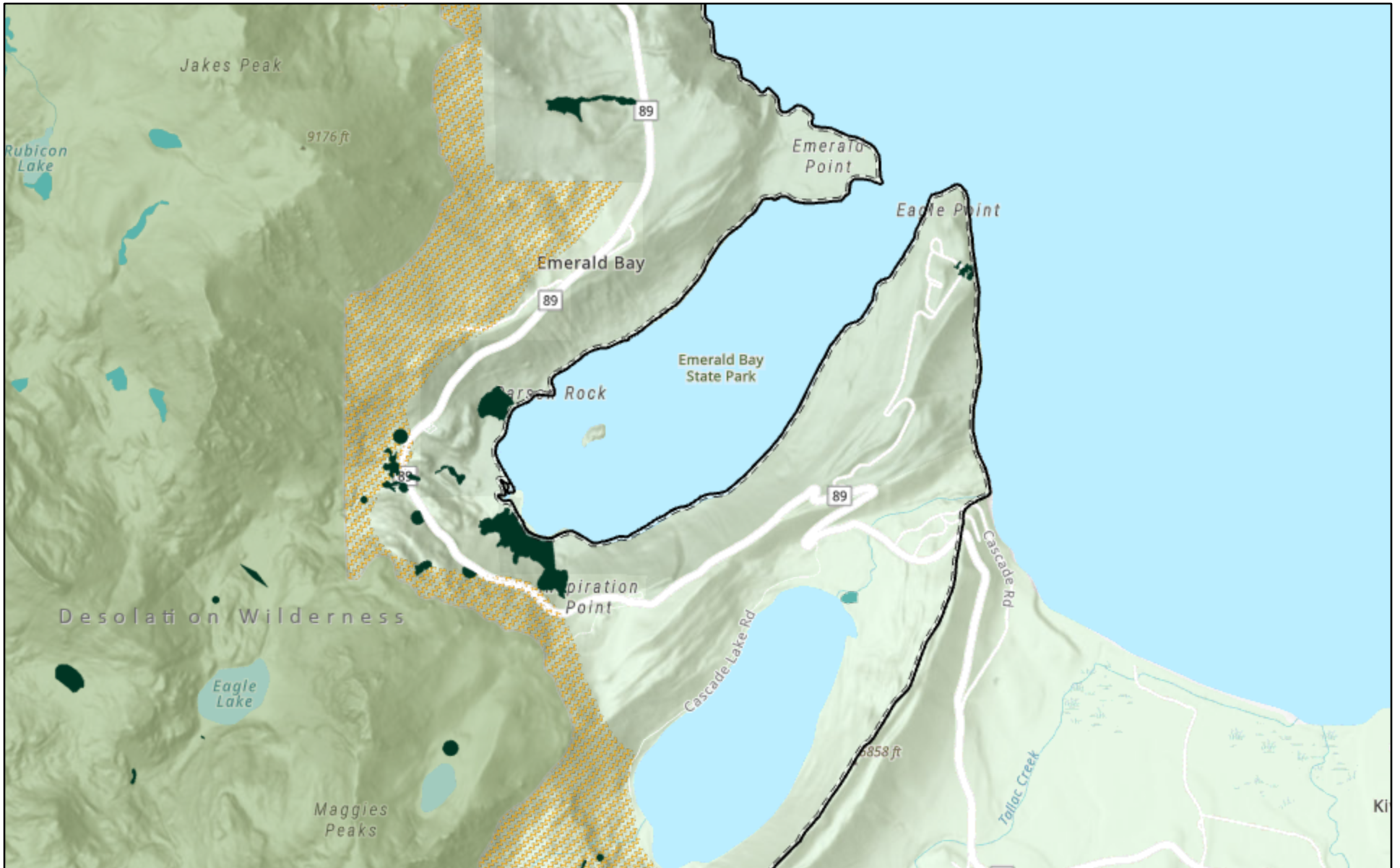
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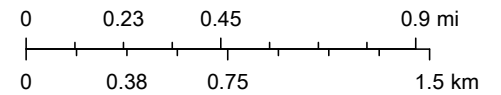
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-  Backcountry
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TRPA, Esri, NASA, NGA, USGS, FEMA