

Back in the early `70's, Bob Dylan wrote (and sang), "What looks large from a distance, up close ain't never that big."



That Dylan lyric came to mind when reports recently emerged of the latest political controversy involving Lake Tahoe. Both nationally and internationally, there's been substantial praise for the pioneering efforts at regional planning and environmental regulation created by the bi-state Tahoe Regional Planning Compact. That Compact, initially agreed to by the States of Nevada and California and ratified by Congress in 1968, created a novel system of regional government for the Lake Tahoe Basin, which straddles the border between the two western states. The Compact's interstate, cooperative experiment in environmental planning and regulation has since been replicated, to one degree or another, in other regions of the U.S.—the Columbia River Gorge and Chesapeake Bay are two examples.

But the bi-state Compact and the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA) that represents the centerpiece of the Compact's environmental planning and regulatory system are far less popular closer to home. Over the past 43 years, environmental groups and California politicians have complained that TRPA hasn't been aggressive enough in protecting Tahoe's spectacular scenic resources and pristine water quality. Meanwhile, business interests and Nevada political leaders have chafed under the environmental restrictions on development that TRPA has imposed over the years. Those resentments periodically erupt into open political warfare: in the 1970's, for example, California was sufficiently disillusioned with TRPA that it threatened to withdraw from the Compact unless it was amended and strengthened. That happened in 1980. After a decade of litigation over the revised, 1980 Compact, the political controversy over TRPA reduced to a simmer, and relative political peace has existed for the past two decades.

But newly-enacted [Nevada legislation](#) has shattered that fragile political truce. The legislation recently signed into law by Nevada Governor Brian Sandoval declares that state's intent to withdraw from the bi-state Compact on October 1, 2015, unless specified, significant changes to the Compact are agreed to by California and ratified by Congress. The most important of those Compact revisions would change the TRPA voting structure in a way that would make it easier for the agency to both approve new development projects in the Tahoe Basin and to amend (and presumably weaken) the environmental protections contained in TRPA's Regional Plan for the Basin. The new Nevada statute would also require TRPA to revise the

Regional Plan to address “changing economic conditions and the economic effect of [TRPA’s] regulation on commerce.”

It seems extremely unlikely that California will accede to Nevada’s political demands. (As noted above, it was California’s insistence that the Tahoe Compact be made more environmentally protective that produced the revised, 1980 bi-state Compact. Environmental preservation of Lake Tahoe continues to draw widespread, bipartisan support among Californians.) So unless Nevada blinks and repeals this unfortunate act of political extortion, nearly a half century of bi-state cooperation and environmental leadership will end in 2015, when Nevada withdraws from the Tahoe Compact. What happens thereafter—and whether the Tahoe Basin’s fragile environment can be preserved—is anyone’s guess.