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****VIA FAX****

March 10, 2006

The Honorable Dina Titus, Chairwoman
Legislative Commission's Subcommittee to Study The Protection of Natural Treasures

Thank you for holding a subcommittee hearing in Hawthorne, Nevada, to highlight one of Nevada's greatest natural treasures - Walker Lake - and one which is among the most threatened. We are pleased to submit this testimony, for the record, of the values of and threats to Walker Lake as well as a list of recommendations on how to protect Walker Lake.

Walker Lake is a familiar sight to travelers on Hwy. 95 between Reno and Las Vegas. Its blue desert waters start on the east slopes of the Sierra Nevada in California, flow through farming communities at Bridgeport and Antelope Valley and then through Smith and Mason Valleys in Nevada. From Wabuska, the joined East and West Forks flow through the Walker River Paiute Reservation and then into Walker Lake, just north of Hawthorne, Nevada. The best-kept secret of Walker Lake is that it is one of only six freshwater terminal lakes in the world.

Walker Lake is famous for its Lahontan cutthroat trout fishery. Recently, the original strain of lake cutthroats which was believed to be extinct was found surviving in a small creek in NE Nevada. These trout which grew to over 40 pounds were re-introduced to Walker Lake in hopes that they will regain their great size. Less well-known is its food support of hundreds of thousands of migratory waterfowl and shorebirds, including biannual visits of up to 1400 common loons. Walker Lake recreational uses are the mainstay of the economy of small rural Mineral County.

Walker Lake has been seriously impacted by over a century of upriver agricultural diversions. It has lost over three fourths of its volume. The Lake level has fallen by 140 feet. Salt levels have increased to a point which now threaten the survival of the trout fishery and will bring about the collapse of the entire freshwater dependent lake ecosystem. Walker Lake has survived droughts and global climatic changes since the Pleistocene, but its fragile ecosystem cannot outlive upriver diversions accompanied by serious droughts.

Walker Lake has no water rights and the river is overcommitted by 140%. Except for a little water from a few creeks and springs on the slopes of Mt. Grant, its only freshwater comes from the river during floods or during high flows when all farmers rights are satisfied.

Previous crises over the threat of rising salt levels were resolved by exceptionally heavy winter snows and freshening spring floods down the river. Salt levels are currently approaching 17,000 ppm. The State of Nevada may decide not to restock Lahontan cutthroat trout if its traditional acclimating program fails and fish mortality rises. Currently, the fish will live, but not reproduce or increase in size at high salt levels. Salt levels will eventually rise to levels at which all freshwater species will die.

Efforts to secure freshwater for Walker Lake began two decades ago. After the 1980's drought, the State was successful in obtaining the rights to some floodwaters for Walker Lake. State efforts on behalf of Walker Lake have been limited, since then, to studies, meetings, and an alternate dispute resolution process on Walker River basin water issues which has reached few agreements or resolutions. Senator Harry Reid's interest in Walker Lake resulted in federal appropriations for Lake and river basin studies and other programs. Mineral County voters approved a tax initiative for legal funds to save Walker Lake and the

EXHIBIT N Treasures

Document consists of 2 pages.

- ☒ Entire document provided.
☐ A copy of the complete document is available through the
Research Library (775/684-6827) or e-mail
library@lcb.state.nv.us.

Meeting Date 3/10/06

Mineral County Commission authorized the Walker Lake Working Group (WLWG) to represent county interests in saving Walker Lake. The group conducts an annual April Loon Tour and has sponsored the 1999 Walker Lake Art Festival.

Walker Lake's water needs have been estimated by NDOW fisheries biologists as 150,000-180,000 af per year, as a minimum, on the average. This would reduce the TDS to levels at which the cutthroat trout and other Lake species would be healthy.

RECOMMENDATIONS: For the protection and maintenance of Walker Lake, we have developed a list of recommendations, for your consideration:

1. Eradicate tamarisk along the Walker River in order to reduce tamarisk-caused water losses from surface and groundwater flows to Walker Lake.
 - on the Walker Lake Paiute Tribe Reservation
 - upriver
2. Commission a study to develop cost-effective solutions for the actual delivery of water to Walker Lake.
3. Buy out marginal upriver farmlands in Mason, Smith, Antelope, and Bridgeport Valleys from willing sellers and extinguish/retire their water rights.
4. Develop groundwater pumping infrastructure to supply agricultural irrigation water for the Walker River Paiute Tribe and send the surface water to Walker Lake.
5. Fund the infrastructure and market development to support farmers switching from traditional crops to native seed crops which require less irrigation in order to send the excess water to Walker Lake.
6. Find an alternative source of surface or groundwater for the needs of the Hawthorne Ammunition Depot and direct all of the Cottonwood Creek water flow to Walker Lake.
7. Fund installation of automatic gauges on all Walker River diversions and on the Walker River Paiute Tribe Reservation to track water deliveries to Walker Lake.
8. Fund Walker River Paiute Tribe experiments to improve the hydrologic cycle on the Reservation with short duration, high intensity livestock use, to monitor results, and to calculate increased flows in the Walker River and its tributaries to Walker Lake.
9. Support Walker River watershed restoration in Nevada and California.
10. Fund the purchase of water from willing sellers for Walker Lake.
11. Fund leasing water from owners for Walker Lake during droughts.
12. Develop incentives to encourage water conservation by all Walker River water users.
13. Establish a water level for Walker Lake necessary for a sustainable native fishery.

Thank you again for allowing us to testify on behalf of Walker Lake - one of Nevada's greatest natural treasures.

s/s

Rose Strickland
Toiyabe Chapter of the Sierra Club