

Wildfire prevention takes a backseat in Calif.

By Julie Cart, CalMatters

Dave Kinateder has a keen eye for trees. But when Kinateder, a fire ecologist in the Plumas National Forest, surveys a hillside lush with pines, he doesn't see abundance or the glory of nature's bounty.

He sees a disaster-in-waiting.

"It's a ticking time bomb," he said, gazing across the dense, green carpet of trees near Quincy, a small community high in the northern Sierra Nevada.

Last year's wildfires, the worst in modern California history, have put a microscope on the forests that cover a third of the state – in particular, on managing these wooded lands in ways that would reduce the frequency and intensity of such blazes.

California is grappling with the counterintuitive dilemma of too many trees, packed too closely together, robbed of the space they need to thrive—and with how to clear out more than 100 million dead trees, felled by drought or insects, that provide tinder for the next infernos.

Curing these unhealthy forests is difficult and expensive, and as with human health, prevention is far less costly than treatment. But these days the state firefighting agency, CalFire, spends the bulk of its resources battling fires rather than practicing preventive measures.

At stake is nothing less than life, property, air quality and the lands that hold most of California's water. A state commission recently prescribed radical changes to address what it terms the "neglect" of California's largest forests.

A 19th-century California forest would have held fewer than 50 trees an acre. Today the state's forests have grown to an unnatural 300 to 500 trees an acre, or more. That doesn't count the 2 million drought-stressed trees a month lost to bark beetles that have killed entire stands.

Gov. Jerry Brown, who in 2014 declared tree mortality a state of emergency, said in his January state of the state address that California needs to manage its forests more intelligently. He vowed to convene a task force "to review thoroughly the way our forests are managed and suggest ways to reduce the threat of devastating fires."

California has dozens of agencies attacking problem but still cannot keep up with the work. Crews around the state have been busy clearing trees as fast as funding allows. This wielding of chainsaws they call "whacking and stacking" leaves massive wood piles along highways in some areas. But it amounts to no more than triage: Cal Fire removes trees on fewer than 40,000 acres a year, far short of its goal of clearing a half-million acres annually.

Kinateder estimates that removing trees in this way costs as much as \$1,400 an acre. By comparison, controlled burns—those set by fire managers to remove vegetation from forests—is a bargain at less than \$150 an acre. Fighting a wildfire comes in at just over \$800 an acre, according to the report.

Far from the forest floor, California officials are wrestling with the financial and environmental cost of the state's forest practices. At a hearing in March in Sacramento, legislators listened to lurid descriptions of raging fire and wrenching stories of human misery recounted by a stream of state and local officials: flames rearing up like an enormous beast, residents running for their lives, neighborhoods leveled, fire burning so hot and for so long that soils were rendered sterile.

A portion of the proceedings focused on a recent report about wildfires and forest health from the Little Hoover Commission, an independent state oversight agency that gave its findings to the governor and Legislature in February. The document pulled no punches, calling the state of the Sierra Nevada's forests "an unprecedented environmental catastrophe."

It cited a century of "mismanaging" the 10 million wooded acres in the Sierra, calling out state and federal firefighting agencies for their longstanding policy of aggressively putting out all fires rather than letting those that can safely burn do so, thereby thinning the choked woodlands.

Helge Eng, deputy director of CalFire, acknowledged the report was "spot on" in its assessment of the state of the Sierra, adding that the analysis "did an especially good job of recognizing that there are no easy, black-and-white answers to the problems we are facing."

CalFire boasts that it stops 95 percent of fires at 10 acres or less, saving lives, property and entire forests from conflagration. Fire experts argue that a negative could be turned into a positive if fire bosses let them burn while still steering them away from people and structures and toward overgrown wildlands in need of clearing.

That's an approach sometimes used by the National Park Service, but it's difficult to defend when forests are ablaze, frightening the public and many elected officials alike.

Still, the report said, "it is not enough for agency leaders, scientists and advocates to recognize the benefits of fire as a tool; the bureaucracy of the state government and public sentiment as a whole must undergo a culture shift to embrace fire as a tool for forest health."

Eng said CalFire is considering adopting the managed-burn approach, when appropriate, but noted that federal

firefighters are often working in wild settings, away from development.

“CalFire’s mission is different; we protect life and property” in areas that may be densely populated, Eng said in a written response to questions. “There is most often not an opportunity to let a fire burn. The risk to human life is just too great.”

The report also detailed a public safety threat from 129 million dead trees, the crushing cost—up to \$1,000 a tree—to private property owners to have trees removed from their land and the enormous burden on rural governments to both recover from fire and prepare their forests to mitigate the intensity of the next one. In no uncertain terms, the commission prescribed dramatically ramping up tree-thinning projects and, as awful as the optics are, creating and controlling some fires to achieve the same result.

Eng agreed that the state firefighting agency was far from achieving its “aspirational” goal of clearing a half-million acres of land each year, citing such impediments as “the logistics of capacity of staff and equipment and environmental compliance,” among other factors.

In a moment notable for its rarity in Sacramento, there was bipartisan agreement in the hearing room this month about the problem, its scope and the appropriate measures to deal with it. Focus more intensely on the problem, they agreed, and throw money at it. The state spent \$900 million fighting fires last year. Just one of those late-season blazes caused more than \$9 billion in reported property damage.

“We’ve made mistakes, and we’ve created systems that are unwieldy... It’s all of our fault,” Jim Branham, executive officer of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency, told *CalMatters*. “Money alone won’t solve it, but we won’t solve it without money, either.”

The mosaic of land ownership in California means the state

owns only 2 percent of the forests but has legal responsibility over much more: 31 million acres, including land in rural counties.

CalFire received more than \$200 million for forest health projects last year and has proposed an additional \$160 million for the next fiscal year. Those sums are on top of the agency's current \$2.7 billion budget. CalFire, in turn, doles out millions of those dollars in grants to local governments and community groups to do some thinning themselves, and it teams with the federal Forest Service to tackle clearing projects.

The work to improve forest health dovetails with other state priorities—protecting water sources and reducing greenhouse-gas emissions.

The Sierra Nevada range is the headwaters for 60 percent of California's developed water supply. Burned, denuded hillsides don't store water efficiently when it rains. Sediment cascades downhill, filling streams, affecting water quality and loading up reservoirs, reducing their storage capacity

The carbon equation is equally direct: When trees burn or decay, they release greenhouse gases. The 2013 Rim Fire near Yosemite National Park produced emissions equal to those of 2.3 million cars in a year.

Prescribed burns emit less carbon than higher-intensity fires, because managed fire is aimed at smaller trees and shrubs. Cleared forest land may still ignite, but it will burn with less intensity and fewer emissions.

Moreover, when trees die, they stop absorbing carbon from the atmosphere. The state depends on that critical service to help reduce greenhouse gases. Research suggests that severely burned areas regrow with shrubs or grasses, plants that store about 10 percent less carbon than trees do.

John Moorlach, a Republican state senator from Costa Mesa, suggests the Democratic governor, a champion of the fight against climate change, has a “gigantic blind spot” when it comes to reducing carbon emissions. Moorlach said in an interview that Brown’s emphasis on electric cars, for example, ignores the role of fire in California’s greenhouse gas inventory.

“We’re being absolute phonies about climate change if we are not dealing with the real driver of greenhouse gas; that’s these wildfires,” said Moorlach. He has proposed that the state dedicate 25 percent of the revenue from its cap and trade greenhouse-gas-reduction system to help counties’ fire mitigation efforts.

Counties would welcome the help. Randy Hanvelt, a supervisor in Tuolumne County, said that where forest management is concerned, there’s a “leadership problem.”

“Talk is cheap,” he said. “We have got ourselves a giant colossal mess. This is a war of sorts. Time is against us. Every available tool has to be applied.”

One such tool is carefully designed burns. But the meticulous planning necessary can take two to three years, and the burns require favorable weather, a permit from the local air district and, crucially, buy-in from local communities that must first be educated about the benefits. And controlled doesn’t mean risk-free.

“Politically, you have to have the ability to make mistakes and move on,” he said.

Nick Bunch, who plans thinning projects for the Plumas National Forest, pointed to a partly cleared hillside outside of Quincy where one of his extensively planned prescribed burns went awry, undone by a shift in the wind.

“We were about an hour into the burn and the smoke started

going into town,” Bunch said, shaking his head at the memory. Even though the burn was going as planned, the smoke was not acceptable to nearby residents, who protested to fire officials. “Phones started ringing. Calls were made, and we shut it down.”

Another method is used in Florida, which trains and certifies private property owners to burn their overgrown land and provides limited liability coverage in some cases. Florida cleared 2.1 million acres this way last year. Scott Stephens, who heads a wildland fire research lab at UC Berkeley, said the widespread adoption of the policy has educated residents on both its benefits and risks.

Back in Plumas County, a hulking building in a parking lot outside a community health complex may offer the final piece of the forest-health puzzle: creating a market for trees removed from California’s forests.

Part of a project managed by the Sierra Institute for Community and Environment, the unremarkable square structure shows a potential use for California trees. The building is the state’s first to be fully constructed from cross-laminated timber—layers of wood pressed together to make thick sheets and posts—equal to or greater than the strength of steel.

In addition, the \$2.3 million facility will house a large boiler to provide heat for the health center by consuming 500 tons of local wood chips a year.

The project is the brainchild of the institute, which envisions it as a way to boost the economies of forest communities. It’s the kind of innovation the governor and Legislature hoped to promote by establishing a Wood Products Working Group to develop commercial uses for the piles of trees beside the state’s roads.

There’s little left in California today of the early 20th century’s timber cutters, sawmills and biomass industry. If

the state follows the Little Hoover Commission's recommendations and accelerates forest thinning, an entire segment of state industry would need to be rejuvenated.

Meanwhile, officials emphasize the need to educate Californians about the role of forests in the ecosystem.

"If you want people to care about something, they have to understand why it matters," said Pedro Nava, chairman of the Little Hoover Commission. "They need to understand the deep connection between the health of our state and the state of our forests."

Branham, of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, said that won't be easy.

"Some of our messages are counterintuitive: We must cut down healthy living trees to save the forest," he noted. "It's a challenge."

Nevada gas prices hit \$3 mark

By Associated Press

Gas prices at Nevada pumps have hit the \$3 mark for the first time in 2.5 years.

AAA Nevada reported Monday that the average price for a gallon of regular unleaded gasoline statewide is exactly \$3.

Read the whole story

Working to combat sex trafficking in EDC

By Jeffrey McKay

Sex trafficking is a topic that has received much attention over the past few years, both locally and nationally. You may hear it discussed in the news or on social media using terms such as human trafficking, domestic minor sex trafficking, online sexual exploitation, or commercial sexual exploitation. No matter what description is used, the reality is there are youth in our county who are victims of sexual exploitation at the hands of traffickers and pimps.

Since 2014, the El Dorado County Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA) has worked with our County partners and local youth serving organizations to combat and address the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) in El Dorado County. This has been accomplished through the establishment of the county's CSEC Task Force, a multidisciplinary team that includes members from the Probation Department; District Attorney's Office; Sheriff's Department; the Placerville and South Lake Tahoe police departments; El Dorado County Office of Education; county counsel; Court Appointed Special Advocates of El Dorado County; and HHSA's Behavioral Health, Public Health and Child Protective Services.

The outcomes for youth who have experienced commercial sexual exploitation can be tragic if intensive services and systems of support are not put in place to serve the complex needs of these victims. The primary goal of the CSEC Task Force is to ensure that county youth who are victims of sexual exploitation or domestic minor sex trafficking are kept safe and receive the services they need.

As the CSEC program coordinator for HHSA, one of the questions

I am most often asked is: “How can I get involved and help?” The best ways to help reduce CSEC and human trafficking are to become aware of the issues, educate yourself on the signs of human trafficking and CSEC, and tell someone if you suspect anyone you know is being trafficked or exploited.

The Polaris Project is a great resource for information on human trafficking. Additionally, the county **Welfare Director Associations of California’s website** is a great starting place for information on CSEC. These resources can serve as a starting point for the conversation on how to best serve youth in our communities who are victims of either human trafficking or sexual exploitation.

Remember, no child can consent to sex and children who are forced into prostitution or exploitation are victims of horrific crimes with life-long effects. While the issues of human trafficking and CSEC are greater than any of us individually, there is nothing we cannot overcome together as informed and engaged citizens of El Dorado County.

If you know a youth who you suspect is being trafficked or exploited, call the El Dorado County Child Protective Services 24-hour hotline on the West Slope at 530.642.7100, in Tahoe at 530.573.3201, the National Trafficking Hotline at 888.373.7888, or 911.

Jeffery McKay is the CSEC coordinator with El Dorado County Health and Human Services Department.

Learn how to banish back pain

By Zachary Child

Low back pain is one of the most common conditions that afflicts adults. In fact, experts estimate that 80 to 100 percent of adult Americans will have at least one severe episode of low back pain in their lives.

To some degree, back pain is a normal process of aging. Like gray hairs appearing on our head, our spine will age, and some discomfort will come along with it. However, it's important to understand the difference between common pain and something more serious—as well as what kinds of treatments can get you back on your feet.



Zachary Child

Common complaints

A low back ache or muscle spasm, brought about by heavy activity, by periods of immobility such as long drives, or upon waking in the morning, is typical of functional arthritic low back pain. Severe flare-ups can cause painful, rigid spasms and seemingly uncontrollable pain. The incidence of this type of back pain increases with age and if you have arthritis. Treatments such as those outlined in the next section usually ease the pain within one to two weeks. But watch for red flags including:

- Fever or chills
- Pain that worsens at night or with rest
- Neurologic symptoms such as radiating arm or leg pain, bladder incontinence, or paralysis

If you have any of these symptoms, or if pain doesn't resolve in a few weeks, call your doctor.

Treatments to try

Exercise. You may have heard that "motion is lotion" for bones and joints. Evidence shows that activities such as physical therapy and yoga help strengthen the back and spine.

Weight loss. Studies estimate that an extra pound of body weight loads the spine by 4 to 8 pounds. That means losing 10 pounds of excess weight might unload 40 to 80 pounds of pressure from your spine.

Heat and ice. Both are effective, so you can choose whichever works best for you.

Medication. Inflammation plays a large role in back pain. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen and naproxen work by blocking the biochemical signals of pain and inflammation. Corticosteroids are a more powerful anti-inflammatory medication but can cause more side effects. Other medications might include muscle relaxers or nerve stabilizers.

Chiropractic care and acupuncture. These are widely accepted treatments that appear to benefit many people. It's wise to talk with your primary care provider before beginning this treatment. It may carry risk if you have a history of stroke or carotid artery stenosis.

If your back is acting up, know that you don't have to live with the pain. Talk with your doctor about treatment options that will get you back to your regular routine.

Zachary Child is a board certified orthopedic surgeon with Tahoe Orthopedics & Sports Medicine physician group, and he will be practicing at the Barton Center for Orthopedics & Wellness when it opens.

Drug Store Project's message continues to be relevant

By Kathryn Reed

Prevention can save lives, especially when it comes to drug use and school violence.

Once a year sixth-graders on the South Shore participate in the Drug Store Project. Today is that day.

It's one of the few proactive educational pieces left for Lake Tahoe Unified School District students to participate in.

"Regardless of what is out there, it's illegal for them. We are trying to demonstrate the reasons why. Their bodies and brains are growing," Lisa Huard told *Lake Tahoe News*.

This is the 15th year Huard has been organizing the event. It is staged at Lake Tahoe Community College, with hundreds of students going through the same scenario. It's a party, one kid says yes to taking something illicit and it goes bad from there.

The people involved are not actors – they are law enforcement, district attorney's employees, court officials, even a mortician. It take 220 volunteers and 47 agencies to pull it off.

It's powerful.

The unfortunate thing is Drug Store Project is not open to the public because more than just this age group could use this sobering dose of reality.

Huard said the curriculum could easily be taught at younger grade levels. The drug problem is that prevalent at an early age.

New this year will be a component with Greg Bergner, a doctor with Barton Health, who will present a segment about marijuana and the adolescent.

Countless studies have shown how the brain continues to develop until age 26. The effects of marijuana on those younger than 26 can be detrimental. Taking cannabis in any form before then can stunt one's cognitive development. In other words, you won't be as smart as you could be if you use marijuana as a young person.

With medicinal and recreational marijuana now the norm, it makes the message even harder to convey. Kids see older siblings, their parents and other adults partaking in pot and other drugs. They don't understand why it's bad for them.

Alcohol is still a major issue as well for youth.

"There are more children today who do not know how to deal with stressors," Huard said. "They see others self-medicate. This just compounds the problems. We don't have the resources for people, especially in this community."

Huard believes beside just telling kids drugs are bad, it's important to find out why they are using and how they are getting the product. They need to understand why they want to feel whatever change the drug brings them. Then, perhaps, it's possible to get to the root of what led them to consume whatever they are taking.

With more parents using, the message through the years has changed from people who do drugs are bad people to the drugs are bad. This eliminates the conflict of mom and/or dad are bad people because of their habits.

“We need to make it clear to kids that drug usage is bad behavior on people’s parts,” Huard said. “There needs to be awareness about what goes in their body.”

Drug use is known to lead to other bad decisions. There so many consequences, and often they aren’t good.

Drug Store Project is about teaching kids that they have choices.

For those who advocate schools should just be about academic learning, Huard said phooey and then some.

“It’s been the three R’s for the last seven years and look where we are at. There is no consistency in the school district,” Huard said.

Opinion: How to stay honest this tax season

By Christian B. Miller, The Conversation

As Americans begrudgingly work through their taxes this year, many could be facing a moral struggle about whether to be honest or not. They might be thinking about exaggerating that donation to Goodwill, or not reporting that side job, among other things.

It is true that each year many people do cheat on their taxes. According to findings released by the IRS in 2016, tax evasion costs the federal government more than \$450 billion each year.

As a philosopher whose research focuses on character and ethics, I can say that there isn’t much controversy that

cheating, in most situations, is morally wrong – and that includes cheating on one's taxes.

So, how can we stay honest this tax season?

We want to consider ourselves honest people

First let's dive into the recent psychological research on cheating.

Researcher Lisa Shu and her colleagues published a study in 2011 in which participants were given a test with 20 problems for which they would be paid 50 cents per correct answer. Their answers were checked by a person in charge, and they were paid accordingly.

This part of the experiment was pretty straightforward.

But then they changed the setup a bit. The participants were told that they would be the ones grading their answers with no one checking on them. The incentive and the test remained the same. They were also told that their paperwork would be shredded and they could report their own "scores."

Here's the difference it made in what people ended up doing: In the first setup where there was no opportunity to cheat, participants averaged about eight correct answers. In the second setup where there was ample opportunity to cheat, the number of "correct" answers jumped all the way to 13.22.

This finding and other published results like them, provide an important lesson about the psychology of cheating: When people think they can get away with cheating, and they also think it would be worthwhile to cheat, they are often motivated to do so.

But that is not all the research has to offer. Using the same basic framework as Shu's study, other research has added some interesting variations. For instance, participants in another study were first asked to recall as many of the Ten

Commandments as they could before they took the test. In another variation, the participants were college students who first had to sign their school's honor code before they began.

Researchers found the average number of problems solved was essentially the same as when participants had no opportunity to cheat and their answers were graded by someone else.

Psychologists have provided an explanation for what is happening here. While people often want to cheat in certain cases if it would benefit them, they also want to think of themselves as honest. What the honor code and the Ten Commandments did in the experiments was to serve as moral reminders of the importance of being honest.

Other studies of cheating have found that even more subtle reminders can be effective. In one such study, cheating continued even when the instructions said, "Please don't cheat. ... Even a small amount of cheating would undermine the study." However, when researchers changed the wording for a second group, people did not cheat. This group was told: "Please don't be a cheater. ... Even a small number of cheaters would undermine the study."

The switch to "cheater" called to mind how the participants wanted to think of themselves as honest. Most fascinating of all, psychologists stopped study participants from cheating simply by having them sit in front of a mirror.

When given a moral reminder, it is hard for most people to cheat.

What can you do to stay honest

Coming back to the tax season, the question is how we can stay honest. Based on the research mentioned here, I want to suggest three practical steps:

- Use tangible moral reminders. They can be as simple as a

Post-it note on your computer to be honest. One could also read a passage from a religious text or a different source of moral inspiration.

- If possible, do your taxes with someone else that you trust. With that accountability, it is a lot harder to give into temptation to cheat. We want to think of ourselves as honest, and we also want other people to think of us as honest too.
- Call upon role models. Try to imagine what your moral heroes in life would tell you to do if you are considering bending the truth to lessen your tax burden.

We shouldn't cheat on our taxes, not because we necessarily care about the IRS, but because we care about being people of honesty and integrity.

Christian B. Miller is an A.C. Reid professor of philosophy at Wake Forest University.

Opinion: Dwindling Sierra snowpack here to stay

By Alex Hall Katharine and Davis Reich, Los Angeles Times

Although recent storms have dumped heavy snow across the Sierra Nevada, the April 2 snowpack measurement showed that it is still well below average. Last week, the Sierra-wide reading put the total snowpack at 15.8 inches of water content, or 43 percent below normal.

Here's an even more sobering reality. According to our new research, such spring snow measurements will be considered far above average in the decades to come.

We have just completed detailed projections of the Sierra Nevada's future climate. Our findings tell the story of a snowpack on life support. If greenhouse gas emissions continue unchecked, by the end of this century, the Sierra snowpack in a typical April will be 64 percent smaller than it was at the end of the 20th century.

Read the whole story

Rate changes coming for Liberty customers

Liberty Utilities customers will definitely see rates go down starting May 1, but they may also go back up.

The 4.5 percent reduction starting in a month is a result of fuel costs going down.

However, the company that services the California side of the basin, Truckee and Alpine County in March asked the California Public Utilities Commission for a 5.27 percent increase to make up for "undercollected revenues due to the bad weather in January-February 2017 when energy use was down."

The CPUC will determine the final rate increase assuming it is approved.

Residential customers will receive a \$29.46 climate credit on their bills in April and October.

Per state regulations, investor-owned utilities like Liberty Utilities must file a general rate case every three years with the CPUC. Liberty last filed one in 2015, with the increase taking effect Jan. 1, 2017. This amounted to a 1 percent for

residential and small commercial customers, with larger commercial entities getting about a 16 percent hike in rates.

Liberty officials are still working out the numbers to determine what amount of increase to ask for this year.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Kirkwood tragedy shines spotlight on deadly mountain hazard

By Benjamin Spillman, Reno Gazette-Journal

During the late afternoon hours of March 4 there was no reason to think Olga Perkovic and her son, Aaron, were in any danger.

Perkovic, 50, a lifelong skier, and Aaron, 10, a member of the Kirkwood JETS ski team, had just spent the day doing what they loved at Kirkwood Mountain Resort.

At 4:27pm they loaded onto the TC Express chairlift to make one last run before skiing back to their condominium to join Olga's mother, Radmila, 80, and daughter, Sophie, 8, to watch the Academy Awards.

They never arrived.

[Read the whole story](#)

Snippets about Lake Tahoe

- Here are the El Dorado-Tahoe and Sierra roadwork schedules from Caltrans for the week.
- Zephyr Cove Library on April 11 at 4pm will be showing "Gnomeo & Juliet" (rated G). The movie and popcorn are free.
- The National Society Daughters of the American Revolution is organizing a chapter in the South Lake Tahoe area. For more info, contact Sally Holcombe at sallyholcombe@me.com.
- The 4th annual Rock Tahoe Half Marathon will be June 16. The 13.1-mile course starts on the mountain top at Spooner Summit and drops more than 1,000 feet as it winds down Highway 50 to the finish line at the Hard Rock in Stateline.
- America's Most Beautiful Bike Ride is a 72-mile ride that circumnavigates Lake Tahoe. The 27th annual event will be June 3. It starts and ends in Stateline.