California's government payroll in 2011 increases by $500 mil.

By Phillip Reese, Sacramento Bee

State government payroll increased by half a billion dollars last year, even as California cut thousands of state worker jobs, according to a Bee analysis of new data from the Controller's Office.

The payroll increase added about $140 million in wages to the Sacramento economy in 2011, contributing to a budding recovery.

The trend is largely due to a shift away from worker furloughs and toward layoffs and hiring freezes. Absent furloughs, most state workers got a full paycheck for the first time in years during 2011, plus some step raises and other union-negotiated bumps.

"Payroll would have grown a lot faster if those (job) reductions hadn't taken place," said Michael Shires, a professor of public policy at Pepperdine University.

State payroll eats a large chunk of the state's budget – almost $18 billion in 2011. During recent lean times, former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and current Gov. Jerry Brown have tried to keep payroll in check, but have taken different approaches.

Through much of 2009 and 2010, the Schwarzenegger administration required workers to take three unpaid furlough days a month, dubbed "Furlough Fridays." That program ended in late 2010, though many workers still had to take one unpaid furlough day a month last year.

The furloughs cut state worker pay by more than $1 billion from 2008 to 2010. But, despite threats of layoffs and hiring freezes, Schwarzenegger never substantially reduced the number of full-time state workers.

Read the whole story

Amanda Lee Matthews – 1986-2012

Amanda Lee Matthews died Jan. 26 after a long fight with juvenile diabetes. She was 25.

Ms. Matthews was born Dec. 22, 1986, in South Lake Tahoe. She graduated from South Tahoe High School in 2005.

Ms. Matthews cared deeply for her family and friends. She loved her cats and dogs very much.

She was studying to be a wedding planner. She had a passion for ’50s nostalgia such as “I love Lucy”, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean and Elvis Presley. Amanda enjoyed many Hot August Nights.

She is preceded in death by her father, Rick.

Ms. Matthews is survived by her mother, Jennifer Matthews; sisters, Molly and Andrea; niece Emma; and many aunts, uncles, cousins and friends.

A celebration of life will be Feb. 3 at 6pm at Hope Lutheran Church of the Sierra, 930 Julie Lane, South Lake Tahoe.

Donations can be made in her name to the Juvenile Diabetes

Foundation.

Punxsutawney Phil: 6 more weeks of winter

By Tina Susman, Los Angeles Times

Punxsutawney Phil, the Pennsylvania groundhog famous for making midwinter weather forecasts, had his moment in the spotlight early Thursday and declared that winter is far from over. But the competition begs to differ.

From Canada to Staten Island to the tiny town of Dunkirk, N.Y., on the shores of Lake Erie, other groundhogs competing for the title of grand prognosticator offered differing opinions on this Groundhog Day, which marks the midway point of winter. Perhaps they were confused by the unseasonably warm weather across much of the eastern half of the country. The temperature Wednesday at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport hit a record for the day: 64 degrees. That's more than 20 degrees above normal for this time of year.

Bob Will, who cares for Dunkirk Dave – a groundhog in upstate New York – along with many other sick and wounded marmots that he nurses back to health, calls the rivalry among groundhogs "a friendly competition." But he also pointed out that while Phil, the most famous of the woodchucks, is actually pulled from his hole and paraded in front of a crowd, Dunkirk Dave is allowed to slowly emerge on his own from a hibernation spot under the ground in Will's yard.

“That’s what they do – they pick them up by the neck and hold them up,” Will said of the event at Gobbler’s Knob, Pa., which was unfolding as Dunkirk Dave poked his head above ground and apparently didn’t spot a shadow, promising early spring weather. “But ours is in the ground. We always kid them and say ours is more accurate.”

Still, Punxsutawney Phil remains the big star in this competition, and as the sun slowly began creeping above the hills and trees of rural Pennsylvania on Thursday, thousands crowded Gobbler’s Knob to await his annual prediction. Legend has it that if a groundhog sees his shadow, winter weather will last another six weeks. If no shadow appears, an early spring is on the way.

Read the whole story

Transportation sustainability lecture in Incline

Volatile oil prices. Looming climate change. Worldwide economic and political unrest. Worsening traffic congestion. Crisis in transportation financing.

All of that will be discussed Feb. 23 at the Two Billion Cars: Driving Toward Sustainability lecture.

The 6pm event is at the Tahoe Center for Environmental Sciences, 291 Country Club Drive, Incline Village.

Facing the consequences brought about by uncontrolled growth and neglected carbon awareness, America’s ongoing love affair with the car will continue to cause widespread environmental

impacts and global conflicts over oil supply, according to the college. These challenges and their solutions are the ongoing focus of research by the Institute of Transportation Studies at UC Davis. For over two decades, understanding the challenges and solutions have been the nexus of institute's work.

Dan Sperling and Tom Turrentine will present their insight of current strategies and research, and promulgate their views of the rapidly evolving transportation and energy solutions of the future. The duo will unveil how new technologies will allow consumers to access a suite of transportation and energy applications, ranging from dynamic real-time ride sharing applications, to programs that help consumers conserve energy in their cars and homes. As tomorrow's advanced transportation technologies rapidly unfolds, will Lake Tahoe's environmentally sensitive communities be ready to drive to a sustainable future?

A No-host bar begins at 5:30pm. A $10 donation is suggested.

For additional information, call (775) 881.7566 or email tercinfo@ucdavis.edu.

Matchmakers put people with farmland

By Carlos Alcalá, Sacramento Bee

Putting farmers onto underused land was once a matter of creating homesteads.

Now it has entered the computer age, with nonprofits using the

Internet to match farmland with growers.

The need, advocates say, comes in part from an aging farm population.

California farmers age 65 or older outnumber farmers under 35 by 9 to 1, said Liya Schwartzman, Central Valley coordinator for California FarmLink, one of those nonprofit groups.

“In many cases, their children don’t want to go into farming,” she said. “We need more beginning farmers right now.”

At the same time, many landowners are hoping to preserve the land for agriculture, not development, and want to help younger farmers – not large agribusiness.

It led to a dating service of sorts for farms.

“We’re kind of a Match.com, a little bit,” Schwartzman said.

Read the whole story

Forest Service burn project near Emerald Bay

U.S. Forest Service fuels management crews will begin prescribed fire operations on the north end of Emerald Bay today. Operations may continue through the week, weather permitting.

Residents and visitors can expect to see smoke from this prescribed fire project area. Smoke may be visible on Highway 89. The Forest Service strives to minimize the impacts of smoke on local communities.

Smoke-sensitive residents should consider staying indoors and keeping doors, windows and outside vents closed. To directly receive prescribed fire updates, send an email to pa_ltbmu@fs.fed.us.

Forest Service staff will post road signs around areas affected by prescribed fire, and update the local fire information line at (530) 543-2600, No. 6.

Other federal, state and local fire management agencies may also be conducting prescribed fire work during this period.

Slopestyle rail jam at Heavenly

Heavenly Mountain Resort is teaming up with Nike Snowboarding to host the fifth stop of the Nike Winter Chosen Tour on Feb. 4.

The slopestyle rail jam will take place from 4-7pm on World Cup.

Nike’s Winter Chosen consists of two components: a video crew competition, in which riding and filming crews enter online for a chance to travel to Austria and compete with professional riders and videographers, and the Night Jam, a freestyle slope session featuring production lighting and local and professional snowboarders competing for $5,000 in cash prizes.

Watch the competition at the base of World Cup for free. For more information, or to enter the competition, go online.

Dismal snowpack melting away fast with all the sun

By Kathryn Reed

PHILLIPS STATION – While there was snow to survey, there wasn't much. The water content measured near Sierra-at-Tahoe on Wednesday came in at 19 percent of normal.

Statewide, the snowpack water content for Feb. 1 is 37 percent of normal.

The water content as measured by the Department of Water Resources was 3.8 inches near Echo Summit. This compares to 24.8 inches a year ago.



Frank Gehrke with the Department of Water Resources talks water content Feb. 1 near Echo Summit. Photo/Kathryn Reed

It was deceiving to have Frank Gehrke take the samples along a 500-foot open area just off Highway 50 while snow was coming down because it gave the perception winter is alive and well in the Sierra.

That just isn’t the truth.

South Lake Tahoe recorded 3.88 inches of precipitation for all of January, according to the National Weather Service. Weather gurus are not seeing any love on their models in terms of winter-like weather. And the blips that may produce moisture this month aren’t enough to make up for the precip deficit all of Northern California and Northern Nevada are dealing with.

While the National Weather Service said this total was not a record low, the water content comes close.

According to the Department of Water Resources, the Feb. 1 water content was the second lowest on record, with those books starting in 1946. In February 1963 at Phillips Station it was all dirt – nothing to record but zeroes.

Gehrke pointed out that besides the abysmal amount of snow (15.6 inches where he measured Feb. 1) and the low water content, the storm patterns are likely going to create a problem for reservoir managers. This is because the snow is melting faster than usual with day after day of sun.

And he said if the winter progresses with these same storm patterns, the white stuff will disappear even faster.

Reservoirs in California that supply municipalities and farmers are still holding their own after the records set in 2010-11, but if this dry pattern lasts all winter, restrictions could be put in place.

Lake Oroville in Butte County, the State Water Project’s principal storage reservoir, is at 107 percent of average for the date and Lake Shasta, the federal Central Valley Project’s

largest reservoir with a capacity of 4.5 million acre-feet, is at 99 percent of its normal storage level for the date.

Besides the lack of snow likely to affect the whole state in terms of water supply in the coming months, it is impacting the Lake Tahoe economy today.

It wasn’t until last weekend that snowmobiling operations started at Tahoe businesses. Kirkwood is the only Tahoe area resort to have its whole mountain open, but with no snow in the forecast for the next two weeks, that status could change. Ski shops are starting to have clearance sales to move merchandise. Snow removal operators may be turning to lawn service soon.

With businesses unable to operate at full throttle it means less operating cash for them, but also fewer employees. South Lake Tahoe’s unemployment rate is at 15 percent, while Douglas County’s is at 13.8 percent.

Feb. 1 DWR readings:

Location	***Elevation***	***Snow Depth***	***Water Content***	***% of Long Term Average***
Alpha	*7,600 feet*	*14.8 inches*	*3.6 inches*	*17*
Phillips Station	*6,800 feet*	*15.6 inches*	*3.8 inches*	*19*
Lyons Creek	*6,700 feet*	*21.8 inches*	*5.8 inches*	*30*
Tamarack Flat	*6,500 feet*	*15.2 inches*	*4.8 inches*	*25*

Censured Placer County judge not seeking re-election

By Ed Fletcher, Sacramento Bee

Embattled Placer County Superior Court Judge Joseph O'Flaherty announced today that he will not seek a new six-year term in the upcoming June election.

In September, the state commission overseeing judicial conduct issued a public censure of O'Flaherty – the stiffest punishment available, short of removal from office.

It was the second time the state Commission on Judicial Performance has publicly disciplined O'Flaherty.

O'Flaherty said that ruling didn't cause him to not seek to return to the bench. He said it would have given an opponent

some ammunition but he remained confident.

“It wasn’t the key factor,” O’Flaherty said of the ruling. “I don’t think anybody could have beat me.”

Read the whole story

Teachers’ pension system returns lag behind projections

By Dale Kasler, Sacramento Bee

CalSTRS is thinking of cutting its investment forecast for the second time in barely a year, a move that will reflect the increase strain on the pension fund.

The teachers’ pension system on Thursday will consider a recommendation from its actuarial consultant to cut the forecast by a quarter point, to 7.5 percent. The consultant, Milliman Inc., said the current rate of 7.75 percent “is greater than the expected long-term return.”

Lowering the forecast means could intensify the pressure on the Legislature and Gov. Jerry Brown to come up with a funding solution for CalSTRS. The retirement system is underfunded by tens of billions of dollars; lowering the forecast will increase the gap by another $5.9 billion, according to Milliman’s memo to the CalSTRS board.

Read the whole story