Groundwater supply being depleted throughout the world

By Devin Powell, Science News

SAN FRANCISCO – Groundwater levels have dropped in many places across the globe over the past nine years, a pair of gravity-monitoring satellites finds. This trend raises concerns that farmers are pumping too much water out of the ground in dry regions.

Water has been disappearing beneath southern Argentina, western Australia and stretches of the United States. The decline is especially pronounced in parts of California, India, the Middle East and China, where expanding agriculture has increased water demand.

“Groundwater is being depleted at a rapid clip in virtually of all of the major aquifers in the world’s arid and semiarid regions,” says Jay Famiglietti, a hydrologist at the University of California Center for Hydrologic Modeling in Irvine, whose team presented the new trends December 6 at a meeting of the American Geophysical Union.

Famiglietti and his colleagues detect water hidden below the surface using the modern equivalent of a dowsing rod: a pair of car-sized satellites, nicknamed Tom and Jerry, that are especially sensitive to the tug of gravity from below.

As the spacecraft chase each other around the planet like their cat and mouse namesakes, they are pulled apart and pushed together by areas of higher or lower gravity. Mountains and other large concentrations of mass have a big, obvious effect that’s consistent from month to month. But water moves around over time, creating small gravity fluctuations that the satellites’ orbital motions respond to.

Read the whole story

Ticket prices lower for New Year's Eve weekend in Tahoe-Reno

By Mel Shields, Sacramento Bee

New Year's Eve in Northern Nevada casinos is usually a pretty good barometer of the state of the economy. In prosperous and optimistic times, major stars perform for tickets prices of $100 and up. When the outlook is less rosy, the prices come down. Few shows this year have high prices.

That does not mean there are not plenty of shows, and it certainly does not mean they aren't good ones. It's just that there are no Liza Minnelli concerts at $250; even when she was here in October the top ticket was only $75. The Silver Legacy has the best weekend lineup, with shows on Thursday, Friday and Sunday, leaving New Year's Eve to parties.

In fact, sometimes it's better to avoid the big night altogether, stay away from the teeming masses (especially the mobs on Reno's Virginia Street and Stateline's Highway 50 at midnight), and take in a show on Thursday, Friday or next Sunday. The rowdy revelry can be avoided, and tickets are easier to obtain.

Comedian Katt Williams is not for everyone, but he's become more and more skilled over the past decade. He started as an unknown in places such as the Improv and the Comedy Club in Los Angeles, then built a loyal following in his own room at

the Hollywood Park Casino, giving him a greater sense of the atmosphere than many of his contemporaries.

Williams expanded his base with his role as Money Mike in "Friday After Next" and other movie parts (none of them exactly stellar but all reasonable successes) and with his appearances in MTV's "Wild 'n' Out" and in videos by Outkast, Lil' Kim and others. He's in the Grande Exposition Hall at the Silver Legacy on Thursday (8pm; 407 N. Virginia St. in Reno; $65, $80; 800.687.8733).

Read the whole story

Woodpecker may alter how USFS manages its land

By Kathryn Reed

A woodpecker may change the way the U.S. Forest Service and others approach thinning projects and forest restoration work in California.

This is because on Dec. 15 the state Fish and Game Commission on a 3-1 vote said the black-backed woodpecker is a candidate for protection under the state's Endangered Species Act. (Commissioner Daniel Richards was the dissenting vote.)



Black-backed
woodpecker

This is the same woodpecker species that Earth Island Justice's John Muir Project said should prevent the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit from initiating the South Shore Fuels Reduction Project and the same animal Earth Justice wants to protect in its quest to halt the Angora Fire restoration project.

It could be a year before the state decides what to do about the woodpecker. The Department of Fish & Game has until next December to prepare a status review on the species. After that, the commission votes on whether to protect the bird.

It's the Center for Biological Diversity and the Earth Island Institute's John Muir Project that are pushing for the woodpecker's protection.

"Black-backeds are heavily associated with areas burned at higher fire severities, much more so than unburned forest or low-intensity burn areas (Hutto 2008). Unless steps are taken to ensure that significant habitat is created and allowed for this species in the project area, the project could threaten the viability of the black-backed woodpecker by further reducing potential habitat across the landscape, thus violating the forest plan's requirement to ensure viability," Chad Hanson, director of the John Muir Project, wrote in his October letter to the USFS. His group wants the final environmental impact statement for the South Shore Fuels Reduction Project to be withdrawn and a supplemental environmental impact statement be prepared.

Those same arguments are being used to lobby the state.

Hanson is the author of a paper titled "Myth of 'Catastrophic' Wildfire".

A judge sided with the Forest Service over conservation groups

regarding the Angora project. This meant work started this summer to thin the area – an area the John Muir Project believes should be left alone because it says it provides habitat for the woodpecker.

This is the Forest Service owned land near where 254 houses burned to the ground in June 2007.

The Forest Service says not clearing the trees will increase the threat of another catastrophic fire.

While the thinning project started this summer, the case is still tied up in the Ninth U.S. District Court of Appeals. If the state says the woodpecker should be listed as endangered, it could make the court case a moot point.

The bird is rare, with people differing over whether it’s always been rare or if its numbers are in decline.

STR recycling Christmas trees

South Tahoe Refuse will recycle Christmas trees through Jan. 6.

Place the tree with the trash on the normal garbage day. All lights, tinsel and other decorations must be removed. Trees must be cut into 6-foot increments or less.

Flocked trees will not be recycled because they cannot be turned into compost.

Commercial customers may bring trees to the refuse center in South Lake Tahoe for the next two weeks at no charge.

For more information, call (530) 541.5105.

Lose the fleece, bring out the shorts in Tahoe

After frigid temperatures, it’s like a heat wave has hit the Lake Tahoe Basin. South Lake Tahoe on Sunday tied a record and Monday broke a record for the high of the day.

At Lake Tahoe Airport the mercury crept up to 56 degrees Dec. 26, breaking the record of 55 set in 1976. Truckee had a high of 54 Monday, but it was not a record.



It was warm enough for shorts at Heavenly Village on Dec. 25. Photo/Kathryn Reed

On Dec. 25 the 55-degree reading in South Lake Tahoe tied the record first set in 1980.

The National Weather Service in Reno says to expect balmy weather into the New Year, with temps hovering around 50 degrees.

The high pressure system that had been sitting off the coast bringing the dry conditions is now directly above the region, which is the cause of the warmth.

A 20 percent chance of moisture is in the forecast for the basin from Tuesday night into Wednesday, but if anything comes of it, meteorologists say it won't amount to much. More rain than snow is likely to fall because it's so warm out.

– Kathryn Reed

Business interests killed the most number of bills in California

By Laurel Rosenhall, Sacramento Bee and and Chase Davis, California Watch

Business interests were the top bill killers inside California's Capitol during Gov. Jerry Brown's first year back in office, as concerns about the state's weak economy cut into labor's newfound clout.

Legislative data show business interests wielded strong influence despite a Capitol dominated by Democrats in the Legislature and the Governor's Office. Business lobbyists defeated bills that would have cut back various tax breaks, required employers to give workers unpaid bereavement leave and prolonged the foreclosure process.

In the current economy, "all legislators are more sensitive to the argument that something would be a job killer or harmful for investment or expansion," said Dorothy Rothrock, a lobbyist for the California Manufacturers and Technology Association, which represents major businesses around the state. "That's made it easier for us to stop or amend bills to make them less hostile or burdensome."Brown's first year back was good for labor unions, too. They successfully pushed bills that limit the state's ability to use private contractors, allow local governments to require union construction crews on public works projects, and reduce the use of electronic self-checkout lanes in grocery stores.

But in the tug-of-war between the Capitol's two power players, industry more than held its own. Business-related groups dominated the list of organizations with the most influence, according to a review of hundreds of bills.

The *Bee* and California Watch examined the final analyses written by legislative staff for all 906 bills introduced this year that listed supporters and opponents. For each group whose stand was registered on at least 10 bills, the news organizations tallied the number of cases in which supporters' bills were signed by the governor and opponents' bills stalled or were vetoed. Either scenario counted as a "win" for that group.

While such a tally is imperfect – it does not assess all influence exerted under the dome – it captures the outcome of the legislative year for many who carry clout at the Capitol.

Read the whole story

Postal cuts worry at-home entrepreneurs

By Karen E. Klein, Bloomberg Businessweek

When he hears about planned U.S. Postal Service cutbacks and closings in 2012, Michael Weiss doesn't think they're going to affect his business.

Like many service providers, Weiss' digital strategy consulting firm, Figure 18 in Westlake Village (Los Angeles/Ventura counties), operates almost entirely with electronic tools and increasingly conducts business over the Internet.

"I take payments and do all my financial transactions online," said Weiss, 42. "I just negotiated a six-month contract that

went back and forth online, and we both signed it digitally. We never even printed it out."

The shift away from first-class mail is one of the reasons the Postal Service has been pressed to come up with a series of cost-cutting measures, including possibly eliminating Saturday mail delivery. A legal requirement that the service must prefund health care retirement benefits for future retirees is another burden – one that many post office employees and supporters protest as unfair.

Business owners who will perhaps be hurt most if the cutbacks planned for May actually take place are the 21 million-plus "nonemployer firms." That's the term the Census Bureau uses to define the self-employed, sole proprietors who account for nearly three-quarters of all U.S. businesses and about $972.7 billion in annual business revenue, roughly 3 percent of total U.S. business activity.

Kristy Wiggins-Gilbraith, who was laid off from her job as a pharmaceutical consultant in 2010, relies on income from the natural bath and body products company she founded to stay off unemployment. Others become eBay sellers or run small enterprises from their kitchen tables to contribute extra income to households struggling to stay in the middle class.

Postal cutbacks could be devastating to businesses like Wiggins-Gilbraith's venture, Green Beetle Bath, which she said brought in about $50,000 this year. "I rely 99 percent of the time on the Postal Service to ship my products, unless the customer requests next-day service," said Wiggins-Gilbraith, 36.

Read the whole story

Nevada looking at ways to deal with sage grouse

By Jeff Delong, Reno Gazette-Journal

Nevada wildlife officials continue to survey prime sage grouse habitat across the state and plan a meeting next month to take stock of efforts to prevent its listing under the Endangered Species Act.

The state will likely use Wyoming's approach to conserving bird habitat as a template for its own policy – a direction recommended early this month by Interior Secretary Ken Salazar.

"We want to avoid listing in a big way," said Ken Mayer, director of the Nevada Department of Wildlife. NDOW will host a meeting of stakeholders in the sage grouse issue in Carson City on Jan. 18.

In March 2010, U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials declared listing for the greater sage grouse is "warranted but precluded" across its range of 11 western states. That means federal scientists believe listing would be justified, but other species in bigger trouble have a higher priority.

The population of the chicken-sized bird has declined for decades, and it now occupies only about half of its original year-round habitat, experts said.

On Dec. 9, Salazar said Wyoming's approach to conserving "core" sage grouse habitat on Bureau of Land Management land can be adopted by 10 other western states, including Nevada.

Wyoming is home to roughly half of the West's greater sage grouse population, while about 25 to 30 percent are in Nevada, Mayer said.

Read the whole story

Donation will help preserve Little Truckee River watershed

The Truckee Donner Land Trust recently received $5 million from the Wildlife Conservation Board to acquire approximately 2,995 acres of land for the protection of significant alpine and wet-meadow habitat, protection of the upper Little Truckee River watershed, and allow for continued conservation-based management and public use of the property.

Through 2011, the Land Trust and its acquisition partner, the Trust for Public Land, has been fundraising in earnest to raise $8 million to purchase Webber Lake and Lacey Meadows north of Truckee in Nevada and Sierra counties.

From a biological, historical and recreational perspective, this may be the most important acquisition the Land Trust says it has pursued. Lacey Meadows comprises 1,900 acres and is one of the best examples of a highly functioning meadow system in the northern Sierra Nevada eco region.

The landscape has been targeted by the Nature Conservancy as a “Portfolio Site” because of the critical habitat it provides for biodiversity in the Northern Sierra Nevada.

Webber Lake has been a private recreation destination for more than 100 years and is said to be the birthplace of sport fishing in the Sierra. The site is also of immense historical significance. Webber Lake Hotel, built in 1860, still stands

on the property, which is traversed by the historic Henness Pass Road, a crucial emigrant and early California commerce route.

The Land Trust, working in partnership with the Trust for Public Land, hopes to close on the properties in fall 2012.

Lecture by Tahoe author

Lake Tahoe author David Antonucci presents an illustrated talk on his newest book on Lake Tahoe, “Fairest Picture: Mark Twain at Lake Tahoe” on Jan. 18 at 6pm as part of the Explore Tahoe Winter Speaker Series.

The event is at Explore Tahoe: An Urban Trailhead located at 4114 Lake Tahoe Blvd., South Lake Tahoe.

A $5 donation is requested. A $5 flat rate fee is offered in the Heavenly Village Parking Garage after 4pm.

For more information, contact Explore Tahoe at (530) 542.4637.