Reports: Food inspections lacking in U.S.

By Kimberly Kindy and Brady Dennis, Washington Post

Recent salmonella outbreaks that sickened at least 523 people and sent dozens to the hospital underscore “serious weaknesses” in the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s oversight of poultry plants, according to a study released Thursday by the Pew Charitable Trusts, which also criticized the government’s failure to push more aggressively for recalls of contaminated meat.

A separate investigation by Consumer Reports, also published Thursday, suggested that those lapses have contributed to the prevalence of potentially harmful bacteria that lurk in store-bought chicken. The magazine independently tested more than 300 raw chicken breasts purchased from stores across the country and found that every major brand contained “worrisome amounts” of pathogens such as salmonella and E.coli, including some strains resistant to treatment with antibiotics.

The USDA’s Food Safety Inspection Service said in a statement that the reports “confirm the need for measures already underway at FSIS to prevent food-borne illness,” including proposals to change how meat is inspected and another to help drive down salmonella rates.

Read the whole story

El Dorado, Placer homeowners to receive millions in settlement

By Hudson Sangree and Mary Lynne Vellinga, Sacramento Bee

California borrowers, including those in El Dorado and Placer counties, could receive as much as $268 million from Ocwen Financial Corp., the nation's fourth largest mortgage servicer, which specializes in subprime and delinquent loans.

A $2.1 billion settlement was announced Thursday between the mortgage servicing giant, the federal government and 49 states.

"This settlement will help homeowners who've been misled while trying to modify their Ocwen mortgages," California Attorney General Kamala Harris said in a press release.

The AG's office said Sacramento County borrowers could receive an estimated $13.5 million under the agreement. Placer County borrowers are slated to get $3.5 million; El Dorado borrowers, $1.8 million, and Yolo borrowers, $1.1 million, it said.

Read the whole story

Positive signs for '14 housing market

By Michele Lerner, Realtor.com

The U.S. real estate market made a robust comeback in 2013, surpassing expectations of many economists, as the combination of low inventories and historically low interest rates caused home prices to rise and even helped fuel bidding wars in some markets, surpassing the expectations of many economists.

While positive trends, such as increasing home values, are expected to continue into 2014, mortgage rates are also expected to rise in the coming year and could put a damper on home buyers' abilities to afford new homes.

Looking back at some 2013 data can give us a hint of the year ahead:

1. Inventory should gradually stabilize

The beginning of 2013 could be characterized as the "year of low inventory" as buyer demand ramped up and homeowners waited for further price increases and evidence of a solid economic recovery before putting their homes on the market. The year began with a significant shortage of inventory and then as early as February the level of shortages started to decline slowly. As 2013 comes to a close, inventory is approximately the same as a year ago. However, homes are selling faster than in 2012, with the median age of the inventory down by 11 percent.

2. A return to positive equity

Rising prices helped 2.5 million homeowners who were previously underwater regain positive equity status during the second quarter of 2013. However, approximately 7.1 million homes were still in negative equity at that time and an estimated 10 million homeowners, or about 21.1 percent of all homeowners with a mortgage, remained "under-equitied," with less than 20 percent in home equity. The good news is that prices are expected to continue rising in 2014, which will lift more homeowners into positive territory. Median list prices for homes in October rose 7.57 percent above the same

month of 2012.

3. Mortgage rates expected to rise

Mortgage rates increased approximately 100 basis points in 2013 and are likely to rise in 2014. The new chairman-designate of the Federal Reserve, Janet Yellen, is expected to continue the policies of Chairman Ben Bernanke, including keeping mortgage rates low by buying blocks of mortgage-backed securities. However, the Fed has considered tapering its bond-buying activity as the economy improves, which could lead to a slight increase in interest rates.

Read the whole story

Artificial sweeteners found in rivers

By Bettina Boxall, Los Angeles Times

Canadian researchers think they have found a great way to trace the travels of treated sewage after it is discharged into rivers: Follow the artificial sweeteners.

The scientists found elevated concentrations of four sweeteners – cyclamate, saccharin, sucralose, and acesulfame – in water samples collected along the length of the Grand River in Ontario, Canada.

Commonly used in diet drinks, the sweeteners got into the Grand by way of the 30 sewage treatment plants that empty into the river and its tributaries.

Read the whole story

Truckee discussing raising sales tax

Truckee officials are considering raising the sales tax by one-quarter cent. The money would be used to construct and maintain trails.

There will be a town hall meeting Jan. 7 at 5:30pm at Truckee Town Hall.

Officials would like to put the question to voters on the June ballot.

The town council will discuss the issue at the Jan. 14 meeting.

For more info, contact Becky Bucar at (530) 582.2932 or bbucar@townoftruckee.com.

Bill doubles USFS air tanker fleet

By Curtis Tate, Sacramento Bee

After a lengthy and destructive wildfire season in California, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., inserted language into a defense bill that will double the size of the U.S. Forest Service fleet of large air tankers.

Feinstein said that the amendment, which she cosponsored with Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., would transfer seven surplus HC-130H Hercules aircraft from the Coast Guard to the Forest Service. The planes can carry a combined 21,000 gallons of water or fire retardant, she said.

Feinstein and McCain included the language into the National Defense Authorization Act. The Senate approved the bill late Thursday on a vote of 84-15.

Read the whole story

TOCCATA Winter MusicFest begins in January

Tahoe Symphony Orchestra and Chorus kicks off its 9th annual Winter MusicFest with the “Brrroque Masters” concert series Jan. 4, 5, 7 and 10.

The program opens with Vivaldi’s famous Concerto for Two Trumpets, featuring baroque trumpeters Mark Lord and William van Meter. Organist David Brock will interpret Händel’s Organ Concerto Op. 4 No. 4 in F major, and performs as continuo player for the other pieces on the program. Arias from J.S. Bach’s Cantata No. 51 Jauchzet Gott, and Händel’s Let the bright Seraphim will be performed by sopranos Joy Strotz, Anna Helwing and Michelle Norris. Finalizing the program will be Bach’s Cantata No. 4 from the Christmas Oratorio.

Maestro James Rawie will conduct all performances.

The performances are Jan. 4, 7pm at St. Patrick’s Episcopal Church in Incline Village (341 Village Blvd.); Jan. 5, 3pm at

St. Theresa Church in South Lake Tahoe (1041 Lyons Ave.); Jan. 7 at 7pm at Shepherd of the Sierra Church in Carson City (3680 Highway 395 South), and Jan. 10, 7pm at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Reno, (501 California Ave.)

Tickets are available at the door or online, and at Tahoe City Visitor Center. General admission to all concerts is $25 adults, $20 seniors, $5 students aged 19 to 23 with valid ID. Preferred seating is $35 and $15 for youth-students. Youth under 19 years of age are admitted free, in non-reserved seating, to most regular season concerts in 2014.

TOCCATA's 9th Season WinterFest continues Feb. 8-14 with Bach's Magnificat, Bruch's Violin Concerto No. 2 featuring Elizabeth Pitcairn with the legendary Red Stradivarius violin, and Saint Saens Piano Concerto No. 2 with the winner of the Paul Guttman Young Artists Piano Competition.

For more information or preferred seating, email ToccataTahoe@gmail.com, call (775) 313.9697, or go online.

U.S. men perform well in downhill

By USSA

VAL GARDENA, Italy – Five-time Olympic medalist Bode Miller (Franconia, N.H.) continued to build speed on the Road to Sochi with a fifth place Saturday in the 46th Saslong Classic downhill in Val Gardena, Italy. After falling behind in the

upper gliding portion of the course, Miller found the gas pedal through the curvy, rolling lower half to nearly make up a full second of time before running out of space to finish 0.15 off the podium.

It was a solid day for North America, as Erik Fisher (Middleton, Idaho) finished 13th, Marco Sullivan (Squaw Valley) 16th and Travis Ganong (Squaw Valley) 19th behind race winner Erik Guay of Canada.

It was Miller's best speed finish of the season as he continues to gain strengh for the Olympic Winter Games after missing all of the 2013 Audi FIS Alpine World Cup season.

Bowman on podium in Freeskiing Grand Prix

By USSA

COPPER MOUNTAIN, Colo. -– Brita Sigourney (Carmel) gained ground on Maddie Bowman (South Lake Tahoe) in the U.S. Olympic qualification standings after her victory in Friday's halfpipe final at the Visa U.S. Freeskiing Grand Prix Series.

Sigourney and Bowman took first and second in the FIS World Cup event with Marie Martinod of France in third.

Sigourney led with a score of 85.00 after a solid first run and Bowman couldn't match it, remaining in second place throughout the competition. Sigourney put down her second run and finished with an 86.6.

Devin Logan (West Dover, Vt.) took the next spot for the USA in fourth, pushing her up to fourth in the qualification standings. Logan was given the FIS World Cup yellow bib as she is the World Cup points leader in halfpipe so far this season after her results Friday and at the New Zealand World cup event. Logan also competed in the slopestyle qualifier Friday but did not to qualify for the final.

Bowman and Sigourney met the minimum Olympic qualification criteria Friday by earning their second top-three finish, but with three qualification events to go, the race for the Olympic team is far from over.

Cold temperatures and falling snow made for challenging conditions, slowing down the athletes in the halfpipe and making it difficult to transition between tricks.

Sigourney's winning run: Alley-oop Japan, leftside 900, alley-oop 540, leftside 540, rightside 540 and 720 tail.

Bowman's second run: Rightside 900, leftside 540 mute, straight-air mute, cork leftside 900, rightside 720 and switch 540.

The next stop in the Visa U.S. Freeskiing Grand Prix tour is Breckenridge Jan 8-12. The event was relocated from Northstar.

Liberty: Without new lines, blackouts possible

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – While the president of Liberty Utilities said he didn't want to be an alarmist, he did say if power lines are

not upgraded, brown outs or black outs in the Lake Tahoe-Truckee areas are possible.

“Even without any new growth I’m at the limit with 650,” Mike Smart, president of the utility company, on Dec. 18 told the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board.

Line 650 runs from Truckee to Kings Beach. The line is 60 kilovolts and a new one would be 120 kilovolts.

CalPeco, the parent company of Liberty Utilities, is proposing a three-phase upgrade to its loop of power lines that incorporate Truckee, Kings Beach, Tahoe City, Squaw Valley and points in between.

Line 625 from Kings Beach to Tahoe City would also become 120KV. Line 650 was originally built in 1959 and 625 in 1971.

Smart said electric use peaked Dec. 30, 2012, at 7pm at 144 megawatts. The previous peak was 124 megawatts on Jan. 9, 2011, at 5pm.

“It was alarming to have that load scenario last winter. We were on the edge and we could be again in the next few weeks,” Smart said.

Working with NV Energy and using the diesel facilities at the Kings Beach substation allowed Liberty to avoid a system failure. Liberty buys its energy from NV, the former owner of the system. Liberty has about 49,000 customers on the California side of the basin, in Truckee and Alpine County.

An increase in electronic devices, bigger houses, growth outside the basin and resorts making more snow are contributing to the overload. The Christmas to New Year’s time period is Liberty’s highest demand for the entire year.

Some people who spoke Wednesday questioned why people in the Lake Tahoe Basin should be paying for the residential and commercial expansion in the Truckee area.

The estimated cost of the project is close to $50 million. It could start next summer, with the first phase taking two years, and completion of the project in 2019.

Liberty per the California Public Utilities Commission is allowed to ask that agency for a rate increase to cover its expenses once the project or a phase of it is completed. The last rate increase was January 2012. Rate increases can occur every three years.

Dave McClure with the North Lake Tahoe Citizens Action Alliance called the electrical lines “a resort loop” because it allows Northstar and Squaw Valley to keep growing.

Laurel Ames with the Tahoe Area Sierra Club believes the upgrades will spur more growth.

Jim Bengochea, lead project engineer, told *Lake Tahoe News* the 120KV lines would provide enough power for what Northstar, Squaw Valley and Homewood would like to do in the future. He said these upgrades could be sufficient for the next 20 or 30 years.

But he stressed that the problem is the electric company doesn’t have the capacity to carry the number of volts required to service customers today without a threat to the system at peak times, adding that the project has nothing to do with proposed future needs.

A concern brought up Wednesday is that the Tahoe City substation relocation is not part of the environmental documents. This issue dominated discussion at the TRPA’s Advisory Planning Commission this month, too.

Tahoe City is working on its area plan, which includes the relocation. Placer County documents also call for moving the substation from the 64-acre tract. It is feared that approval of the Liberty Utilities project could hamper efforts to move the substation in the future.

While this was not an action item for the board, members talked about possibly moving the lines farther into the forest for scenic reasons. However, 47,000 trees are already slated to be removed to put in the larger poles and bigger cables.

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Notes:

• Comments on the draft environmental documents are being taken until Jan. 7. The TRPA, CPUC and U.S. Forest Service are agencies putting out the documents. Wendy Jepson with TRPA is the point person – (775) 589.5269 or wjepson@trpa.org. More info is online.