Congress may adjust online sales tax rules

By J.D. Harrison, Washington Post

Four months after the Senate approved a controversial bill requiring online merchants to start collecting sales tax, a pair of lawmakers have opened the debate in the House, but with one major change from the original legislation – no exemption for small businesses.

House Judiciary Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., and Rep. Spencer Bachus, R-Ala., a subcommittee chairman, recently released an outline of principles for online sales tax legislation, citing input from taxpayers, trade groups and state and local governments. In it, they argue that lawmakers should take action to level the playing field for brick-and-mortar and Internet retailers.

“Americans across the country are affected by the issue of Internet sales tax whether they are consumers or business owners,” Goodlatte said in a statement, adding that the principles are meant to “provide a starting point for discussion in the House.”

Currently, states have the authority to collect online sales tax, but the onus is on the shoppers, not the sellers, to report what the transactions.

Read the whole story

USFS alters restrictions near American Fire

Forest Supervisor Tom Quinn has signed a new emergency closure order for portions of the Tahoe National Forest within and adjacent to the American Fire area.

It is effective now until May 1. The order is less restrictive than the previous one and is in place for human safety and resource protection.

The order opens Foresthill Divide Road, Deadwood Ridge Road, and Forest Service Road 43 (Flat Ravine) to through traffic and also opens Robinson Flat campground.

The Western States Trail (WST) between Michigan Bluff and Deadwood Cemetery is open, and OHV Loop 6 (Forest Service Trail 11E44) is open west of Deadwood Ridge Road. However, the WST and Loop 6 within the fire area east of Deadwood Ridge Road remain closed.

The entire fire area, including all interior trails and roads, is closed except the portion of Foresthill Divide Road that passes through the fire area.

Discharging a firearm, air rifle, or gas gun into the fire closure area is also prohibited.

The Forest Service can issue a permit to private landowners or other adults with a reasonable need to access the closed area.

The area is being patrolled, and people entering the closed area without a permit will be cited.

Feds studying traffic and climate change

By Tony Bizjak, Sacramento Bee

UC Davis was chosen this week in a national competition to lead an $11 million federal study of how to reduce the impact America's transportation system has on climate change – and to come up with ways to keep people moving when catastrophic climate events occur.

The U.S. Department of Transportation announced the Davis Institute for Transportation Studies will look into ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions caused by the everyday movement of Americans to work, school and elsewhere.

Federal officials say the national transportation system, mainly solo drivers in cars, accounts for a quarter of greenhouse gas emissions, which have been said to influence climate change, including extreme weather events such as hurricanes. Davis researchers will head a team with several other universities on the two-year project.

Read the whole story

Water ruling may impact

Calif. fire fee

By Tim Hearden, Capital Press

SACRAMENTO – A judge's recent preliminary ruling that California water rights fees are invalid has piqued the interest of a group suing the state over fees charged to rural landowners for fire prevention.

Sacramento County Superior Court Judge Raymond Cadei agreed with petitioners that fees charged by the State Water Resources Control Board disproportionately burden rights holders with funding the agency's Division of Water Rights.

"The deficiency rises out of the fact that no fees are assessed against the holders of approximately 38 percent of all water rights in California as expressed in acre-feet," Cadei wrote in his ruling, issued Sept. 6. "This evidence is sufficient to establish that holders of water rights that are not charged fees nevertheless receive a benefit from the division's regulatory activities …"

The proposed ruling, which could be finalized at an Oct. 30 hearing, comes as the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association is leading a legal challenge against $150-per-structure assessments imposed in rural areas as part of the 2011-12 budget package.

Read the whole story

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



• Stella restaurant in Truckee is singled out in October issue of *Ski* magazine as a place to go eat.

• Tiffany Hetherton Grimes will be joining the Zephyr Cove office of Coldwell Banker Select.

• Truckee's Big Truck Day and Open House is Oct. 12 from 11am-2pm at 10811 Stockrest Springs Road.

• Todd Offenbacher will give a free talk about climbing in the Arctic and skiing in Antarctica on Oct. 8 at 7:30pm at Sierra Nevada College, rooms 139/141, Incline Village.

• Former Douglas County Manager Dan Holler is going to be interim town manager for Mammoth Lakes.

Poetry reading, workshop at SNC

Al Maginnes and Peter Makuck are part of Sierra Nevada College's Writers in the Woods series.

They will give a reading at the Incline Village school (room 139/141) on Oct.4 at 7pm and a workshop Oct. 5 at 9am.

Maginnes' poems have appeared in "Poetry, The Georgia Review", and "Shenandoah". Makuck is a poet, short story writer, critic and professor at East Carolina University.

Readings are free and open to the public. The three-hour workshop can be taken for credit and is also free to students. There is a $50 registration fee for community members.

Contact June Sylvester Saraceno at (775) 881.7514 or jsaraceno@sierranevada.edu for more info.

Time to sweep the chimney

With the cooler nights soon to be upon us, it’s time to make sure your chimney is in safe working order.

We at the South Lake Tahoe Fire Department annually respond to numerous chimney fires, mainly due to creosote buildup in the chimney flue. This type of fire has the potential to extend into your house and do major damage.

To prevent this from happening, the fire department recommends periodic cleaning of your chimney. Thanks for helping keep our community fire safe.

– Sallie Ross-Filgo, South Lake Tahoe Fire Department

Experimental forest holds keys to wildfires

By Tia Ghose, LiveScience

Experimental forests that have been groomed to slow wildfires could reduce the frequency of catastrophic fires in the future, researchers say.

The decade-long project to slow and contain forest fires could become a blueprint for fire management across California. The project, which was developed in an experimental forest at UC Berkeley's Sagehen Creek Field Station in Truckee creates pockets of thinner trees in areas where the fire risk is high, while still leaving pockets of dense growth for wildlife habitat.

"The idea is that you coordinate treatments to change fire behavior across a landscape – a big landscape," said John J. Battles, a Berkeley forest ecologist who helped develop the method.

The forest in the Sierra has evolved to thrive with frequent, small fires that consume saplings and brush on the forest floor. For instance, giant sequoia cones are sealed by a glue that only melts in fire, releasing their seeds.

But conflagrations like the recent Rim Fire – California's fourth-largest wildfire in recorded history and the largest forest fire in the Sierra – happen, in part, because a century of fire suppression and replanting has left forests overgrown, with thick underbrush and cramped trees providing the perfect fuel for blazing hot fires. Hot fires scorch the earth, burning seeds in the ground and the carbon in the soil, and thus potentially changing the forest permanently.

The easiest way to contain or slow the spread of wildfire is to thin the forest. But old forests also provide habitat for iconic animals, such as the California spotted owl and the American marten. Many areas are too steep to reach with bulldozers to rip out trees, said Scott Conway, a vegetation management officer with the U.S. Forest Service in the Tahoe National Forest, who is also involved with the project.

Fire researchers are using models of the landscape and tree density, local weather patterns and historical fire data, combined with habitat information, to find the areas that are likeliest to burn catastrophically. The idea is that by treating only a portion of an area – typically about a third – fire managers can slow the spread of fire across the entire landscape, Battles said.

"By treating in certain spots, the fire never really gets rolling hot," Battles told *LiveScience*.

For instance, northeast-facing slopes are likely to be cooler and wetter – and, therefore, less fire-prone – than southwest-facing slopes or ridgetops exposed to wind. Fire tends to race up steeper slopes more swiftly than flatter areas. Therefore, fire managers often treat southwest-facing slopes and the flatter areas around steeper slopes that can't be reached by bulldozers.

"We would only strategically treat a portion of the landscape but in spots where we knew fire normally comes from," Conway told *LiveScience's OurAmazingPlanet*. "When fire hits one of these [treated areas], it's forced to slow down and flank around these treatments."

The strategy has been used in a few experimental forests: at the Sagehen Creek Field Station as well as the American River Ranger District of the Tahoe National Forest.

The method allows firefighters to actually protect critical areas, Conway said. (If the fire burns too hot, firefighters can do very little to contain it.)

The plan is to expand the method across the entire Sierra Nevada in order to reduce the frequency of catastrophic fires like the Rim Fire.

The researchers may already have a chance to see how their approach has worked: A fire is burning in the treated area of

the American River Ranger District.

Once the fire dies out, the team will have a rare chance to see how the new technique worked in action, Conway said.

Time to sign up for health insurance

By Barton Health

Ready to change your health care coverage? If so, the time to do it is rapidly approaching.

Open enrollment for the Health Insurance Marketplace, often called the health insurance exchange, starts Oct. 1. The marketplace is designed to help you find health coverage that fits your budget and meets your needs. Coverage starts Jan. 1.

What's in it for me?

When you use the Health Insurance Marketplace, you'll fill out an application and find out what your monthly premiums will be for various levels of insurance coverage. You'll also find out whether you qualify for subsidized lower out-of-pocket costs.

In addition, the marketplace will tell you whether you qualify for free or low-cost coverage available through Medicaid (Medi-Cal in California) or the Children's Health Insurance Program.

How is it different from before?

Insurance plans in the marketplace are offered by private companies, and they all cover the same core set of benefits,

called essential health benefits. These essential health benefits include at least the following items and services: ambulatory patient services, emergency services, hospitalization, maternity and newborn care, mental health and substance use disorder services, including behavioral health treatment, prescription drugs, rehabilitative and habilitative services and devices, laboratory services, preventative wellness services and chronic disease management, and pediatric services.

No plan can turn you away or charge you more because you have an illness or medical condition. And plans can’t charge women more than men.

How do I find my exchange?

If you live in California, visit California’s Health Insurance Marketplace, called Covered California, online. Nevada residents can visit Nevada’s Marketplace.

Yeah, but will it really help me?

The marketplace simplifies your search for health coverage by gathering the options available in your area in one place. With one application, you can compare plans based on price, benefits, quality, and other features important to you—before you make a choice. You can also get help online or by phone.

We can help you

Remember, enrollment starts Oct. 1. Go to Barton’s website to access to local health care reform information, future educational events, website links, and the latest news affecting area residents.

Opinion: Higher ed needs to make changes now

By Byron P. White

Somewhere between our group's discussion of three-year bachelor's degrees and its deliberation over the value of general-education courses, the sensation swept over me: I've seen this before—or at least something close to it. Déjà vu.

The people engaged in the conversation were different this time. They were members of Cleveland State University's senior leadership team. We had gathered for President Ronald Berkman's annual two-day fall retreat, which began with an overview of the forces that are driving the need for urgent change in higher education.

Noting our industry's notorious reputation for being stuck in its ways, President Berkman baited his vice presidents and deans: "Do we really have an appetite for change?" he asked. Thus began a vigorous dialogue among my colleagues in which we delved into all manner of institutional innovation.

The scene reminded me of similar sessions at another time, in another place, concerning urgent change in another "mature" industry. That industry was the newspaper business. I began my professional career in 1984 as a newspaper reporter, and after about 10 years, I had ascended to the management ranks of the Chicago Tribune. I recall countless conversations around that time with senior staff and peers at national conferences where we would discuss the powerful forces threatening the industry and how we desperately needed to respond.

We never really did, at least not sufficiently enough to stem

the onslaught of technological advancements, disruption of business models, and shifting consumer preferences that have since conspired to pretty much dismantle newspapers as we knew them. Tribune, parent company of my beloved Chicago paper, filed for bankruptcy a few years ago. In my current home, Cleveland, the Plain Dealer recently ceased home delivery on certain days in order to prolong its survival.

I moved to higher education more than a dozen years ago, just as newspapers were beginning their rapid descent. However, listening to my Cleveland State colleagues during the president’s retreat, I could not help but draw comparisons between our current predicament and the one newspapers faced a few years ago.

Byron P. White is vice president for university engagement and chief diversity officer at Cleveland State University.

Read the whole story