Tahoe fire crew achieves hotshot status



The Tallac Hand Crew is now the Tallac Hotshots. Photo/USFS

By Kathryn Reed

Twenty of the best firefighters in the country are now based out of South Lake Tahoe.

The Tallac Hand Crew that was created in 2001 is now the Tallac Hotshots. They went through a rigorous process to ascend to this prestigious status.

“It’s a pretty big deal and a pretty big accomplishment,” Kit Bailey, Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit fire management officer, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

These are the most elite firefighters. There is no higher level than this Type 1 team. They are assigned to the complex fires and work the toughest terrain in remote locations where their lives are often on the line.

Days off are rare, though things have changed since Bailey was a hotshot. In those days bosses were not as cognizant to the

need for a little down time and the ability to reconnect with their families. Still, a day off may only come every 14 days.



“When I was on a hotshot crew, you’d think you are going home and you get about five miles from the station and then you get another call. You make a left turn and who knows where you will be for the next week,” Bailey said. “You can’t even expect you are going home until you walk in the front door. And that may only be for a few hours.”

Supervisors are expected to be available 24/7.

Of the 20 members, eight are full-time, year-round employees, while 12 are seasonal. The one woman is in a supervisory position. Some are graduates of the Lake Tahoe Community College Fire Academy.

While the physical strength required for the job is obvious, the mental toughness is another aspect. That isn’t something that can be taught. They have to deal with working practically around the clock in an uncontrolled environment, under conditions that are brutally hot.

Because of this it was teamwork, leadership and the administrative capabilities that were most scrutinized when the group of evaluators examined the Tallac crew.

The final test of the multiyear process to become a hotshot team was a three-day review by a cadre of Forest Service personnel.

“The biggest part is leadership and qualifications for those leaders,” Bailey said.

Nearly a day and a half was spent making sure the team had its

administrative and management skills in place. This is because all of the parts and pieces of fighting a fire are complex, Bailey said. It’s so much more than putting water on fire and the muscle to do so.

Then the inspection team did a 1-on-1 leadership exercise, and went over all their equipment and vehicles.

Finally, it was time to get outside to prove their moxie. They had been given a scenario of a mock fire. They cut line for more than four hours. All that time their speed and progress was being timed and measured. Surprises were thrown at them like a spot fire crossing the line.

“There is a lot of emphasis on crew communication,” Bailey said.

Suddenly a radio is out. Now communication must be face-to-face. A power line crosses their path. Aircraft is incoming with water or retardant.

How the crew deals with these situations is being tested.

One of their own goes down, creating an incident within an incident.

Ultimately they must deploy their shelters.

They passed every test they were given.

Besides this three-day test, the Tallac crew has been peer reviewed while in the field at real fires. There are about 2,000 hotshots through the United States.

While other teams in the Lake Tahoe Basin have tried to achieve hotshot status, this is the first to successfully do so.

“It gives us a higher level of knowledge, skill and experience we can rely and depend on in basin,” Bailey said.

But like all hotshot teams, they are not solely assigned to fires in their home territory. The local crew has been working the Coleman Fire in northwest Nevada just south of the Oregon border.

“They are a national resource,” Bailey said of all hotshots.

Opinion: Caesars headed for the deep end

By Eli Segall, Las Vegas Sun

When drowning in debt, most people know they shouldn’t splurge on a new mansion, buy a high-end sports car or drool over a 150-foot yacht.

Caesars Entertainment Corp. didn’t learn that lesson.

The Las Vegas casino giant, weighed down by almost $24 billion in IOUs stemming from a 2008 buyout, is pushing ahead with major projects in the United States and Asia, despite soured finances and bondholders’ default claims.

Caesars is the parent company of Harrah’s Lake Tahoe and Harveys in Stateline.

The company plans to open the $442 million Horseshoe Casino Baltimore next month with partner Rock Gaming. In New York, executives submitted plans for an $880 million, 115-acre resort about 50 miles north of New York City. CEO Gary Loveman said Caesars wants to raise – and will have no trouble doing it – at least $5 billion to build a resort in Japan, where casino owners are salivating over the potential of legalized casino gaming. And in March, South Korea gave Caesars and its

partners the green light to build a resort that reportedly will cost up to $2.2 billion.

Read the whole story

Vending machines go upscale

By Shan Li, Los Angeles Times

At Hollywood & Highland Center, mere steps from Hollywood Boulevard's souvenir-hawking dives, tourists can drop up to $1,000 on fine caviar.

But they aren't pampered with white-glove service. Tins of the delicacy are dispensed at the tap of a button – from a vending machine.



Veronica Wong buys cupcakes from an ATM in New York. Photo/LTN

After decades of serving up junk food, vending machines are putting on airs.

High-tech versions are popping up at gas stations and shopping malls, peddling edibles more commonly found at restaurants or

specialty stores. Some offer free Wi-Fi and touch screens that entertain shoppers while they wait. Many accept credit or debit cards, and a few even sell outrageously expensive items such as jewelry.

Sprinkles Cupcakes is installing its “Cupcake ATM” at all 16 bakeries around the country.

Read the whole story

DCSD convening panel to address lake issues

STATELINE – A group of Whittell High and Zephyr Cove Elementary school parents, teachers and administrators is being formed to iron out differences and plan for the future.

Parents this spring have flocked to school board meetings to voice their frustrations with how Whittell is being treated. No one spoke at the July 8 meeting and only a handful of people attended it. Also at issue is the imminent proposed consolidation of the two lake schools into one K-12 institution.

Superintendent Lisa Noonan told *Lake Tahoe News* she hopes the panel that will be convened next month will look at immediate and long-term goals for the two Zephyr Cove schools. She wants the group to look at the master plan and see if the K-12 proposal is still valid.

It took the Douglas County school board 40 minutes Tuesday to figure out the parameters of the group.

There will be three parents, three teachers and one community

member on the panel. The parents and teachers will represent the various schools at the lake, with Whittell counting as two schools because in many ways the seventh- and eighth-graders are a unit unto themselves. That is one of the divisive issues – how that block of students is treated.

Cindy Trigg and Tom Moore will represent the board at the meetings, with Teri Jamin and Ross Chichester their respective alternates.

Noonan is tasked with finding a facilitator outside the district to run the meetings.

An application will be devised for potential panel members to fill out. A group within the district will review them for substantive content, with the facilitator making the final selection of who is on the panel.

All meetings will be open to the public and there will be a comment period at each. Noonan was hoping recommendations to the board could be finalized by November, but said it may be more appropriate to have findings delivered to the board in January when it meets at the lake.

Also at the meeting, it was stated that there is still no buyer for the former Kingsbury Middle School.

– Kathryn Reed

Citizens may help select Douglas County manager

Douglas County is looking for community members to help select the next county manager.

The 71 applicants are being whittled down, with a slate expected to be presented to county commissioners July 17.

Following the selection of top candidates, an panel, including advisory members from the public, will be part of interview process.

The chosen candidates will be visiting Douglas County on Aug. 4-5.

Douglas County is looking for people interested in participating in the advisory interview panel. If interested, submit your name and contact information to Douglas County Human Resources at 775.782.9860 or at wlang@co.douglas.nv.us no later than July 16.

Aquarium fish found near Kings Beach creek

By Heather Segale

Lucas McNamara, 7, was hiking around Griff Creek near Kings Beach Fire Station last week with his family when he saw a black, spiny fish, about 1-foot-long lying dead in the creek. He ran up the creek bed, yelling, “Dad, you need to look at the big crazy fish!”

Lucas' parents, Steve and Jen McNamara, decided to make this a teachable moment for their son, who already shows active interest in science and the environment.

"I told Lucas that this fish is not normal for Lake Tahoe and may be harmful to the other fish and animals in the lake," Steve McNamara said.

They brought the fish to the UC Davis Tahoe Environmental Research Center in Incline Village.



Lucas McNamara, 7, finds a non-native fish in Griff Creek near Kings Beach. Photo/Steve McNamara

UC Davis TERC fish biologist Brant Allen recognized the fish as a Plecostomus, or common algae-eating aquarium fish. These fish can grow too large for their tanks. Allen presumed someone made the bad decision to release the non-native fish into the wild.

"This prehistoric-looking, tropical fish may have died because it couldn't survive the cold creek temperatures or didn't have enough accessible food," Allen said. "Either way, it highlights the continued lack of understanding of aquarium dumping at Lake Tahoe."

Goldfish found in the Tahoe Keys were most likely the result of private citizens dumping their unwanted pets. The goldfish

were able to find mates, spawn, and have babies in the lake. Some of the goldfish caught in Lake Tahoe had grown to between 7 and 15 inches in length, and approximately 0.3 to 4 pounds.

Other non-native warmwater species such as largemouth bass, bluegill and crappies have also gotten a foothold in the lake and are competing with native fishes and changing the food web in ways that are still being investigated. UNR and California Department of Fish and Wildlife researchers have removed more than 50,000 fish (weighing 7,000 pounds) from the Tahoe Keys through mechanical removal electroshocking projects in an attempt to reduce the harmful impact on the native fish populations.

“One of the most powerful tools in keeping Lake Tahoe beautiful is the connection between people using the lake and scientists trying to understand what may be impacting it,” said UNR researcher Marion Wittmann.

She commended the McNamara family for taking the extra step to inform scientists of unknown organisms found in or near the lake. An organism like this tropical fish that does not belong here could potentially impact the lake’s health.

Citizen monitoring gives scientists quick notice about problems before they can become greater problems.

“I think it’s exciting to show my son and others the importance of protecting our environment,” McNamara said.

This past holiday weekend had a huge number of people visiting the Lake Tahoe region. There was also a high amount of careless behavior, including littering, vandalism, dangerous fireworks and non-native species transport. Volunteer beach clean-up events organized by the League to Save Lake Tahoe indicated that 2,260 pounds of trash were picked up from five sites around the lake.

Thankfully, there were also a large number of caring

volunteers and citizens who had their boats inspected for invasive species, cleaned up the beaches, picked up trash, and did their part to protect the environment at Lake Tahoe.

Watercraft are the largest transporters of aquatic invasive species (AIS), and the boat inspection program is critical to preventing the spread of AIS into Lake Tahoe and the surrounding water bodies. A new invasive species infestation in Lake Tahoe could have devastating impacts.

Invasive species multiply quickly and can colonize on all underwater objects including docs, water pipes, filtration systems, piers, ramps, and boats. They destroy fish habitat, impair boat engines and negatively impact water quality and recreation.

This season alone, inspectors have intercepted and decontaminated 23 boats containing invasive species bound for the waters of Lake Tahoe. Some of these boats contained invasive quagga mussels, and some were carrying unidentified snail species. Without natural predators, these invasive species pose serious threats to the ecology, recreation and local economies of the Lake Tahoe Basin.

Heather Segale works for the UC Davis Tahoe Environmental Research Center in Incline Village.

Chateau stores nearing completion





Work at the Chateau in South Lake Tahoe is nearly finished. The sidewalk along Highway 50 is open to the public.

The storefronts are just waiting for finishing touches and then tenants.

While it was anticipated shops would have been open before July 4, there is no opening date now. South Lake Tahoe officials still have not received any permit applications from anyone seeking to put up a sign. A spokesman for the project is not releasing information.

Ski clothing and a T-shirt shop are the known retailers beyond McP’s pub which will occupy the circular building above.

The retail portion is a fragment of what was supposed to be the city’s largest development project. A convention center and two hotels were also to be built. The permits still say that is what will happen one day.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

CTC has free firewood available

California Tahoe Conservancy is offering free permits for up to two cords of wood.

The Conservancy treats about 100 acres by hand per year. Usable wood generated by these treatments is bucked into rounds for public collection by permit holders.

Permits and location maps may be picked up at the Conservancy office at 1061 Third S., South Lake Tahoe.

For more information, stop by our office or call the firewood information line, updated weekly, at 530.543.6061.

Workshop for potential school board candidates

El Dorado County Superintendent of Schools Jeremy Meyers and EDCOE legal counsel David Girard will conduct a workshop for perspective school board members on July 14 from 5:30-7pm.

Subject matter will include time commitment, the Brown Act, policy development, budget responsibilities, and the role school boards play in public education.

The workshop is free. It will be at 6767 Green Valley Road, Room B-2, Placerville.

A light dinner will be provided. Contact Janet Maruniak at

530.295.2217 or email jmaruniak@edcoe.org to register.

Fines possible for Calif. water wasters

By Don Thompson, AP

Wasting water outdoors amid the state's drought will begin hitting Californians in the wallet under get-tough restrictions being proposed by state regulators, with fines of up to $500 a day for overwatering front lawns or washing a car without a nozzle on the hose.

The State Water Resources Control Board next week is scheduled to consider draft emergency regulations made public Tuesday. They are intended to put teeth into conservation efforts that so far have produced disappointing results.

Most of the regulations to be considered by the board are aimed at reducing outdoor water use in cities and towns, which the board said accounts in some areas for more than half of residents' daily water use.

The regulations would prohibit overwatering of lawns and landscaping that causes runoff onto sidewalks or streets, washing sidewalks, driveways and other hard surfaces, using a hose to wash a vehicle unless the hose has a shut-off nozzle and using drinking water in a fountain or decorative water feature unless the water is recirculated.

Violations would be infractions punishable by fines of up to $500 a day, and tickets could be written by any public

employee empowered to enforce laws. While $500 is the daily maximum, most cities are likely to have a sliding scale that starts with a warning and builds for repeat violations.

“We are in a drought of historic proportions,” board Chairwoman Felicia Marcus said in a telephone interview with The Associated Press. “Many urban water users don’t realize how bad this drought is. They’re not seeing the communities that are actually running out of water. … They don’t see the streams and creeks running dry.”

If the board adopts the regulations after hearing comments during a July 15 public meeting in Sacramento, the rules would take effect immediately and remain in effect for nine months.

They do not target indoor water use, such as doing the laundry or dishes, although some individual cities and water districts have asked or required their users to reduce overall water consumption.

Marcus said the restrictions to be considered next week represent what the water board considers the minimal level of conservation.

“We’re not doing standards here that say you have to kill your lawn,” Marcus said. “It doesn’t mean you can’t take a shower. … It just means, think about it.”

She said the board might consider additional steps as the drought continues.

Under the proposed rules, urban water agencies would have to implement their water-shortage contingency plans to require mandatory restrictions on outdoor water use, if they have not done so already.

Water agencies without such a plan would have to act within 30 days to require their residents to restrict outdoor irrigation to no more than two days each week or take other mandatory

steps to conserve the same amount of water.

Water agencies that do not comply could face fines up to $10,000 each day.

The generally obscure State Water Resources Control Board is assuming a more high-profile role during California's drought, which has left some communities scrambling for drinking water and led to thousands of farm acres being fallowed.

The board usually regulates such things as wastewater and irrigation discharges to rivers and the ocean, as well as any activity that changes a waterway or harms water quality.

But the board's five members, who are appointed by the governor, are acting under Gov. Jerry Brown's emergency drought proclamation in January and a related executive order in April, as well as drought legislation he signed in March. Last week, for example, the board adopted a different set of emergency regulations that will accelerate enforcement of orders prohibiting some junior water rights holders from diverting water from rivers and streams.

The additional restrictions the board will consider next week were proposed after a recent survey of water suppliers serving 25 million Californians showed that current voluntary and mandatory conservation efforts had resulted in just a 5 percent decline in use through May. Brown is seeking a 20 percent reduction.

The survey found 30 percent of water suppliers had imposed mandatory restrictions that include limits on outdoor irrigation, washing vehicles and filling ornamental fountains and swimming pools.

Water use already was down the last three years because of dry conditions and poor economic conditions, and the survey found a significant reduction this May compared with the previous three years.

Nearly all those who responded said they had increased their conservation outreach, while 40 percent had increased their enforcement and monitoring. Two-thirds of the suppliers are requesting 20 percent water conservation, and 7 percent changed their water rates in response to the drought.

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