Editorial: Tweak big water projects bill

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the May 10, 2013, Sacramento Bee.***

The water infrastructure of the United States is aging, and aging fast. Yet Congress hasn't enacted a Water Resources Development Act, authorizing U.S. Army Corps of Engineers projects and providing policy direction, since 2007.

Senate Bill 601, now on the Senate floor, is an achievement. California Sen. Barbara Boxer, who chairs the Environment and Public Works Committee, won a rare unanimous vote to get the bill to the Senate floor.

The bill does a lot of good – creating a National Levee Safety Program, providing low-interest federal loans for flood control and water supply projects, using the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund surplus to expand spending for channel maintenance, increasing the user fee on inland waterways to fund much-needed improvements. It emphasizes the use of natural infrastructure to deal with the threats of intensifying storms, floods and droughts.

The bill also has found a way to get around the sweeping, excessive House earmark ban for any project "targeted to a specific state, locality or congressional district." The Senate bill would give congressional authorization to a project that has a favorable report from the Corps chief engineer, plus a project plan. That helps Sacramento's Natomas levee project, which has been held up by the House earmark ban.

But the rare unanimity in the Senate committee has come at a cost.

Under the guise of “streamlining,” Boxer has allowed provisions that would make the environmental review process of Corps projects more bureaucratic while undermining the nation’s bedrock environmental laws.

Certainly all reasonable parties agree that key agencies should be brought together early to coordinate projects. The problem is that Sections 2032 and 2033 in S 601 make the process rigid, imposing a “deadline-and-fine” process. Feasibility studies would have to be completed within three years, or face bureaucratic hoops for extensions. Fines would kick in if agencies don’t meet deadlines they’ve set, unless they can prove extenuating circumstances.

What is driving this? Certainly the Corps’ Los Angeles River feasibility study has run into funding problems and years of delay – and studies of port projects to widen and deepen channels for bigger ships take a long time.

But before senators vote for a bill that would curtail environmental reviews, they should take a breath and remember Hurricane Katrina and the Corps’ Mississippi River Gulf Outlet project that funneled Katrina’s storm surge into New Orleans.

A May 6 report by the Congressional Research Service points out that environmental review for Corps of Engineers proposals on average takes two to three years. Obviously, some large, complex or controversial projects take longer, but that’s what in-depth review is for. Most delays come from lack of funding and resulting backlogs.

With the House starting to work on its own bill, promising to undo reviews that can raise important concerns, the Senate should be wary of imposing requirements to complete environmental reviews within three years.

Boxer should accept amendments that modify Sections 2032 and 2033 so the bill streamlines but doesn’t undermine review of Corps projects. The nation is long overdue for a new Water

Resources Development Act, and S 601 has many good elements. But after the Katrina disaster, this is no time to go backward in making sure the Corps does projects right.

Letter: Warning from LTUSD

To the community,

Local contractors may be receiving phone calls and invoices regarding the "2013 California School Guide". Please be aware that this guide is not sponsored by, or affiliated in any way with LTUSD, nor is this guide recommended by the Lake Tahoe Unified School District. The "2013 California School Guide" is developed and distributed by School Publishing (aka Medical Publishing, aka Municipal Publishing, etc.), an independent publisher located in Riesel, Texas.

This publisher solicits companies that have done business with school districts, hospitals, municipalities, etc. to purchase an advertisement in their guides. The company claims that "the guide is a high quality online publication that provides a valuable resource to school districts and educational agencies". However, LTUSD cannot to confirm receipt of the publication either in print or online, now or at any time in the past.

Building contractors may not be fully aware of what they are agreeing to, as the district's name is discussed in the verbal and printed communication. Invoices received by contractors not only include a confirmation number and amount due, but specifically name the "Lake Tahoe Unified School District."

Please contact LTUSD at (530) 541.2850, ext. 225 if you have any questions or email info@ltusd.org.

Angie Keil, LTUSD

Grocery stores slow to embrace Obamacare labeling

By Sarah Kliff, Washington Post

Back when it was passed just over three years ago, the Affordable Care Act included a provision to add calorie information to all chain restaurant menus.

Fast forward to 2013, and that requirement still has not gone into effect. While some restaurants took preemptive action and have posted calorie information on their menus, there's no final regulation that requires such information to be provided. What gives?

Bloomberg News' Stephanie Armour did some digging and came up with an answer: Big grocers have some big problems with the proposed requirement.

"The lobbyist for grocers including Kroger and Safeway is calling on President Barack Obama to curtail a U.S. heath law provision that mandates the companies display the calorie content of all their foods," Armour reported.

The Food Marketing Institute, which lobbies on behalf grocery stores, is supporting legislation that would limit the requirement to "only apply to stores that get more than half of their total revenue from restaurant-style food prepared on site."

A while back, I spoke with Brendon Cull, who handles government affairs for the Krogers chain, for a story that

never quite got finished. The case he made to me was that grocery stores aren't fast food restaurants, even those that have small sit-down areas where consumers can purchase and eat prepared food.

Cull said if forced to comply, Krogers would need to spend $20 million to come into compliance with the new regulations. And it's not just about buying poster board and listing calorie counts. It's about figuring out how many calories each item has to begin with.

"All those items have to be sent out to a nutrition lab," Cull told me. "That's a pretty big undertaking."

It's worth noting that the draft regulation, in its multitude of pages, included an option where grocers would not be included among the locations required to post calorie information; the regulations would apply only to a "restaurant or similar food establishment."

That's where Krogers would like to see the administration land.

"These regulations make sense for a restaurant, but that's not the case for a bakery in a grocery store," Cull said. "We might have thousands of SKUs for birthday cakes and thousands of types of prepared pizza. The problem is it forces us to label all of that, down to the olive bars and salad bars."

The final regulations are supposed to be finished this year. Then we'll know more about whether big grocers score a big victory.

I-80 chase near Truckee ends with 1 death, 2 hurt

By AP

A man driving a BMW led California Highway Patrol officers on a wild high-speed chase on Interstate 80 Monday afternoon, injuring two roadside workers as the car went airborne and landed upside down.

The pursuit began about 1:40pm when an officer tried to pull the driver over for reckless driving on eastbound I-80 near Dutch Flat, in the Sierra Nevada, CHP Officer Pete Mann said.

The driver of the 1989 BMW accelerated instead. Speeds climbed to more than 100 mph during the chase, which spanned more than 50 miles over the crest of the Sierra and back.

The driver left the interstate and changed directions near Truckee, heading westbound on I-80. After crossing back over Donner Summit, the driver entered a lane closed by construction cones near the Soda Springs-Norden exit and lost control of the vehicle as he tried to turn around.

The BMW went airborne and struck two California Conservation Corps workers.

“As it was actually flipping through the air, it actually hit them as they were trying to run away,” Mann said.

A female worker suffered what he described as a “moderate head injury” and was taken by helicopter to a Reno hospital. A male colleague was treated for shoulder pain at the scene of the crash.

I-80 was closed between Soda Springs and Kingvale while authorities investigated Monday evening. It has sense reopened.

The CHP attempted to pull the driver over after receiving reports of a BMW driving erratically, but Mann said officers do not know why he refused to stop. The driver's name was not released pending notification of next of kin.

Westbound Interstate 80 is closed because of a fatal accident at Castle Peak.

Neither Caltrans nor the California Highway Patrol is estimating when the road will reopen.

Traffic is being diverted off I-80 at Soda Springs to Old Highway 40 to Kingvale and then back onto I-80.

The incident began about 2:10pm with a chase with speeds hitting 100 mph.

The driver crashed in the Truckee area. The suspect is dead and A California Conservation Corps employee injured. That person is receiving care for non-life threatening injuries at Renown Medical Center in Reno.

No names are being released nor why the suspect was originally wanted.

Hotel industry expects good summer season

By Jason Q. Freed, HotelNewsNow.com

If early indications ring true, it's going to be a busy summer for hotels across the U.S. as both families and business

travelers are expected to hit the road in droves.

Several hoteliers reported to HotelNewsNow.com that advanced bookings are up dramatically year over year, backing up a new forecast by STR that predicts strong performance metrics for June, July and August. STR is the parent company of HotelNewsNow.com.

Not only is demand up, but most hoteliers said pricing power has returned and they are finally able to push rate without experiencing consequential declines in occupancy.

According to STR, average occupancy at U.S. hotels for June, July and August combined is expected to be 70 percent, up 1 percent from last year. Average daily rate is expected to be $112.21, up 4.4 percent from 2012, and revenue per available room is expected to be $78.50, up 5.4 percent from 2012.

Preferred Hotel Group, a “soft brand” that provides sales, marketing and technology solutions to more than 600 independent and luxury hotels worldwide, is reporting the biggest boost. The company’s North American portfolio has 27 percent more business on the books for June and 36 percent more in July than it did at this time last year, said Jonathan Newbury, VP of strategic development.

“As of May 4 we had already booked 73 percent of the amount of reservations as we did the entire month of May last year. That’s same-store, like for like,” Newbury said. “Obviously, we are very pleased about that.”

Summer at the Crowne Plaza Hollywood Beach Resort in Hollywood, Florida, looks promising too, according to GM Mike Long. Long said both transient and group demand are up compared with last year, and are even beginning to approach peak occupancy numbers from what he called the “golden years” of 2007 and 2008.

“The Crowne Plaza Hollywood Beach has put substantial

marketing effort into increasing summer international business," he said. "… We are increasing roomnights from Latin America—Brazil, Argentina, Columbia, Peru and Chile—Europe and especially the U.K."

Hoteliers report several main factors leading to an increase in expected performance metrics. First, any incremental demand is especially meaningful in a period where supply growth has been virtually nonexistent.

"We are seeing the real effect of the collapse of the supply chain and new development across the board, particularly across America," Newbury said. "I think the demand is coming back strong, as is consumer confidence and business confidence."

Newbury also pointed to Tuesday's record close of the Dow Jones Industrial Average, above 15,000 for the first time, as a factor that will have more businesses feeling comfortable about sending salespeople out on the road.

And, for Preferred, a target niche audience of older baby boomers is feeling more comfortable today than they were just four years ago that they will have enough savings to get out and travel.

"People are not only staying more, they're staying longer," Newbury said.

While occupancy is forecasted to be up slightly this June and July across Chesapeake Hospitality's 20-hotel management portfolio, the real movement will be in rate. Chesapeake Executive VP Joe Smith said advanced-booking rates are up 6 percent for transient leisure business.

Smith said the boost in ADR is partly because travelers feel more confident and are willing to spend more and partly because of a strategic effort by the hotels to push rate.

“I think over the past couple years the industry—and rightly so—has talked about leaving rate on the table and we’ve got to get back to pushing it,” he said. “We believed that philosophy long before the past few years but sometimes competition forces your hands.

“From our perspective, we went into 2013 with budgeted rate increases,” Smith continued. “We had an action plan to increase those prices and it’s working. We had given direction that staying flat from a rate perspective wasn’t going to fly.”

At the Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa in Miramar Beach, Florida, GM Gary Brielmayer said the hotel will be 95 percent full in the June, July and August months, as it typically is. Each year the hotel exceeds prior year ADR across those months, and this year will be no different, he said.

Rates continue to lag a little behind the 2007-2008 peak, said Long of the Crowne Plaza Hollywood, but rate growth is slowly catching up to occupancy demands.

“One of my hoteliers told me it’s like someone turned the spigot back on,” said Newbury of Preferred. “The hose is starting to fill with water. It’s going to take a while to get back to the rate highs we saw in 2007 and 2008.”

“Our occupancy, demand and revenue were at their highest in 2007 and 2008,”said John Hernstat, director of sales and marketing at the Hyatt Regency Lake Tahoe Resort, Spa and Casino in Nevada. “Currently, we are only a few percentage points behind surpassing these figures for 2013.”

Chesapeake has both group- and leisure-oriented hotels in its portfolio. The “group houses” are always the most wary going into each summer, Smith said, as summer demand is typically driven by leisure travel.

This year is no exception as group demand is faltering.

“Group is down all three months,” Smith said. “Group occupancy will be less than last year unless something quickly happens to change that.

“Interestingly,” he continued, “group rates are up about 6 percent for the summer. So while occupancy is down, our sales teams have been able to get additional dollars.”

According to advanced-booking data from TravelClick, the transient segment is continuing to support both ADR and committed occupancy over the group segment in 2013.

In the 12 months from April 2013 to March 2014, overall committed occupancy for the transient segment is up 3 percent versus this time last year and ADR is showing a gain of 4.1 percent. However, the group segment is showing an occupancy increase of 1.9 percent and an ADR gain of 3.8 percent compared with this time last year.

Smith said, in some of Chesapeake’s markets, the hotels are impacted by the sequester and other government travel cutbacks. Those observations have fluctuated month to month, he said.

“I think we’ll end up flat in occupancy for summer months over last year (combining group and transient),” he said. “Last year was a very good year so that’s not necessarily bad.

“But we’re seeing rates in both transient and group up,” he continued.

Class keeps motorcyclists safe on the road

By Catherine Van, KOLO-TV

CARSON CITY – As the weather keeps getting nicer, more people will start leaving their cars behind and opting for two-wheel transportation. This season, you'll have a chance try riding the hog safely and at an affordable price.

"I just love the freedom, riding out in the open wind and it's just a wonderful feeling," Rory Cass said.

Cass has been riding his motorcycle for more than 20 years, but still wanted to learn some safety skills he can apply on the road.

"You have no protection so it's really up to you, it's really up to everyone on the road, but it's really up to you," he said.

He is taking a three-day beginner's course at the Western Nevada College tore-learn the fundamentals of riding a bike safely.

"It's a good class for safety. It identifies some issues you might encounter on the road and just basic handling characteristics on the motorcycle and just techniques that will keep you safe," Blair Harklerod, rider coach said.

Students can also earn the M endorsement to add to their driver's license. They sit through classroom instruction, but also get some hands-on experience outside as they go through drills and techniques on the bike that will keep them safe on the road.

"People will sometimes get fixated on looking for cars and big objects when the motorcycle is right there," Harklerod said.

It’s required by law for motorcyclists to wear a helmet and protective eye-wear, but it’s also recommended that they wear gloves, over the ankle boots and reflective gear to stay visible and safe.

Remember, if you’re riding as a passenger, it is illegal not to wear a helmet as well.

“I didn’t think it would be this involved and I’m really impressed. I’m really enjoying it,” Cass said.

Classes will run through early November a the Carson City Campus. The course costs $106.

Youth softball league starts on South Shore

High Sierra ASA, the recreational softball league for girls and boys ages 5-16, kicked off Saturday.

The season usually runs May through June, with teams being notified and practices starting in April. We were late in getting things organized this year as Marilyn Breisacher, Dani Brewer and myself took it upon ourselves to “resurrect” the league.



Recreational softball season under way in South Lake Tahoe. Photo/Sheri Schimmel

It had fallen in numbers and organization and we three – as softball is near and dear to our hearts – wanted to bring it back to where it was in the past.

We had our opening day festivities at STHS on May 12 with the flag salute, national anthem, games to improve skills for all the kids, and hot dogs, drinks, chips, and potato salad.

Games are played at Tahoe Valley for the Mini's and Farm, and STHS Field of Dreams for Minors and Majors, weekdays 5:30-7pm and Saturdays starting at 9am.

Divisions are Minis (5-7), Farm (8-10), Minors (11-13) and Majors (14-16).

– Sheri Schimmel

Lake Valley Fire at times has more ambulances in service

than engines

By Kathryn Reed

About a year into a change in how engines and ambulances are staffed by Lake Valley firefighters, the chief of the department says it's working.

"We don't run out of fire engines because we have mutual aids. But frequently we run out of ambulances when things get busy," Lake Valley Fire Chief Gareth Harris told *Lake Tahoe News*. "We have ambulances at both of our stations fully equipped. We just need personnel. We can take them off an engine and get them on an ambulance without any additional money because paramedics are on the engines."

Ambulances on the South Shore on the California side are operated by a joint powers agreement that involves Lake Valley and South Lake Tahoe Fire Department. Three ambulances are always on the streets.

New ambulances were acquired last year, which has allowed two older ones to be retained at the Lake Valley stations and be added to the fleet when needed.

There are times when all three regular ambulances are in service. This is more likely to happen in ski season or during summer with car accidents, or if someone is driven to a hospital other than Barton.

"The bottom line is if someone calls 911, we need to take care of our customer whether it's a fire engine or if it's medical," Harris said. "Our engines all have advance life support. But we can't transport a patient on an engine. We are trying to provide better value to the public."

Mountain bike race benefits Tahoe

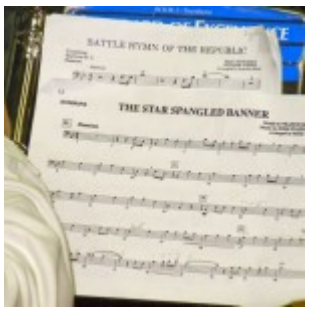
The Pine Nut Cracker Race on May 18 will help support the Corral Trail fund.

Alta Alpina Cycling Club will be donating the proceeds from the mountain bike race for the Tahoe trail to become a flow trail.

Distances of the Pine Nut race vary from 11 to 29 miles. Register online.

Pearl Izumi and Bike Habitat are sponsoring the event.

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



• A free, informal concert on May 17 will honor Lake Tahoe Unified School District music teachers JJ Clause and Linda Kurek who are retiring. It begins at 5pm at South Tahoe High School.

• Here are the El Dorado-Tahoe and Sierra roadwork schedules from Caltrans.

• TAMBA's first South Tahoe trail day of the season is May 19. Meet at the Oneidas Street parking area at 9am to ride in together.

- Does Tahoe need something like this?: