Dogs need training to be responsive ski companions

By Grayson Schaffer, Outside

Of all the hazards out there in the woods – mountain bikes, porcupines, thin ice, your trigger-happy hunting buddies – none are as dangerous as skiing with your dog. You've got four long, sharp metal edges that move at high speed; he's got four soft paws and, most likely, a strong drive to chase and be near you. If you ski with your dog, chances are you've cut him. If you're lucky, you didn't sever a tendon or muscle. Of the half-dozen editors' dogs who ski with us on a regular basis, including my dog Danger, I can't name one that hasn't either been cut or, worse, run over by a snowmobile.

The fix is investing the time and discipline into proper obedience. Your dog should wait patiently while you ski down, stop, and call him to join you. On cat tracks, he should heel beside you without nipping at your skis. Do it right and your dog gets to run around in the mountains all day. Avoid it and your dog is stuck at home. The only commands you need are heel, here, and sit. To ski with your dog, though, you'll need these commands ingrained over time as behaviors.

Teaching him to wait

Start all new training drills in the home, where obedience is likely to be better than outside. Most dogs will master new skills better if they initially learn them without the distraction of unfamiliar places.

1. Have your dog sit. He should remain sitting until you either call him to you or ask him to heel. Practice by walking circles around your sitting dog. He should follow you with his eyes but not get up.

2. Now walk away from him. If he breaks and runs to you, correct him immediately and return him to his sitting position. Make him wait. Then call him to you and have him sit again. This is the way skiing should work: You move away from him and then call him to you. In some cases, you'll want him to wait for you to stop, in others, like powder, you'll get a head start on him and then let him follow.

3. Now take it to the field. Once you're getting consistent results inside, build up your pup's patience outside, where there are distracting smells. If he won't do it while you're in street clothes, he definitely won't when you're on skis.

4. If he's consistent on land, then you're ready for snow. Many local ski areas allow up-hill skinning and dogs on the slopes before the lifts open. Pick a mellow beginner slope, preferably groomed, where you can slide away from your dog backward. Have him sit. Move only a few feet away, make him wait, then call him to you. Build up the distance slowly. You want him to succeed every single time. Once he's solid on groomers, take him into the backcountry.

Teaching him to heel behind a skier

1. Before you can heel your dog beside you while you ski, you'll need a good off-leash heel on land. You'll know you've got a good heel when your dog is constantly making eye contact while heeling, looking for instruction. If he's still sniffing the ground or occasionally wandering, keep working on correcting these behaviors. An energetic dog with a good off-leash heel will almost run in place to match your slower speed.

2. When you're ready to move to snow, start snowplowing on the beginner slope. Your dog may have to heel behind you rather than beside you. On narrow tracks or in powder, when there's only room for one of us, he naturally goes behind. If obedience breaks down and he lunges for your skis, go back to

using a leash on snow. Move slowly. Have him go from heeling to sitting to build patience. If he breaks, stop and start over.

3. Be consistent. Once you're taking your dog into the backcountry, he should be heeling all the way up the hill. You can't let him run free and then expect him to know that you've changed the rules for the descent.

Upshot

In all of this, you may have to adopt a different attitude about what it means to ski with your dog. I like to think of skiing as one of his jobs. When he's on the snow, he's on the clock: No petting unless it's as a reward; don't let him sniff or wander without correction. You may feel like a taskmaster at first, but once it's ingrained in the two of you, you'll begin to work like a team and stay out of the vet's office.

Public welcome at Byrne's memorial service

There will be public memorial service for Alyssa Byrne on Jan. 12 at 10am in the gymnasium at Casa Grande High in Petaluma.

People are asked to wear pink – Byrne's favorite color.

Byrne, 19, died last week near South Lake Tahoe after attending the SnowGlobe Music Festival.

Proposal would revamp standardized tests in California

By Theresa Harrington, Contra Costa Times

SACRAMENTO – California's schools chief on Tuesday called for sweeping changes in the standardized tests that measure student achievement, dispensing for the most part with multiple choice questions in favor of more rigorous, thought-provoking exams.

As part of an overhaul of the state's curriculum standards, the STAR tests familiar to every parent and student would be transformed in two years with requirements for in-depth essays and projects that students will complete on computers. The changes proposed by state Superintendent Tom Torlakson go far beyond the tests themselves, impacting how teachers teach and how students learn.

While Torlakson's proposal must be approved by the governor and Legislature, it is almost certain to be adopted in some form. It aligns the state's instruction and testing with a recently-adopted set of Common Core State Standards for curriculum that are being phased in now by some school districts, with required implementation by 2014-15. Those standards seek to deepen learning by, for example, requiring students to read informational texts as well as fiction and dig deeper into mathematical concepts as well as memorizing tables.

"Multiple-choice, fill-in-the-bubble tests alone simply cannot do the job anymore, and it's time for California to move forward with assessments that measure the real-world skills our students need to be ready for a career and for college," said Torlakson, a former teacher in East Bay schools. "As a

teacher, what's most exciting is that these new tests will serve as models for the kind of high-quality teaching and learning we want in every classroom every day."

California's Standardized Testing and Reporting, or STAR, tests are administered to every public school student beginning in the second grade. The test results are used to rank the state's schools, determining which ones need to bolster their instruction and, in some cases, which ones will get extra money or need different leadership to perform better. But the multiple-choice-only tests have long been criticized for forcing teachers to focus on dull lesson plans heavy on rote memorization.

Torlakson's other recommendations include:

Assess college readiness using English language arts and math tests taken by all high school juniors.

Develop science tests based on new curriculum standards to be adopted next fall.

Create or use other new tests for students with severe cognitive disabilities.

Determine whether it will still be necessary to administer tests in alternate languages, since new assessments are expected to include language supports and accommodations.

Discontinue required tests for second grade and create a state-approved list of tests in math and English language arts for second-graders to be used voluntarily by schools.

Consider alternatives to the California High School Exit Exam.

$235 million Yosemite Valley renovation plan unveiled

By Mark Grossi, Fresno Bee

The National Park Service is calling for a $235 million renovation of world-renowned Yosemite Valley – featuring a pedestrian underpass near Yosemite Falls and a limit on visitors during crowded times.

The changes are part of the embattled Merced River Plan, a draft of which was released Tuesday. Yosemite Lodge, listed for removal in an earlier option, will be retained. There will be more campsites, too.

But popular Curry Village Ice Rink will be torn out. Bicycle and raft rentals also will go away, though visitors still can bring their bikes and rafts, said Kathleen Morse, Yosemite chief of planning.

“There’s a limited amount of space in Yosemite Valley,” she said. “People are more interested in day-use parking and more campsites.”

The $235 million would come from several Yosemite National Park income sources, including entrance and concessions franchise fees, leaders said. No additional money is needed from Congress, they said. The projects will be spread out over 15 to 20 years, Morse added.

This is the third time the park service has written the Merced River Plan. The previous two were stopped by a lawsuit, which succeeded in forcing the park service to specify a visitor limit.

The activist group Friends of Yosemite Valley led the legal protests. Representatives spoke with park officials throughout

the planning process. However, activists declined immediate comment because they had not yet seen the 2,500-page draft environmental document.

In the last decade or so, more than 10,000 people have commented on the park's proposals for protecting the Merced River, the main stream through the 7-square-mile valley.

About 4 million people visit Yosemite each year, and up to 70 percent pass through the valley to see iconic landmarks such as El Capitan, Half Dome and Yosemite Falls.

The public will have until April 18 to comment on the draft environmental document for the plan. By court order, Yosemite must have a final plan in place by late July.

Officials say they are optimistic that the plan will pass muster this time, but there is no guarantee that another lawsuit will not be filed.

Morse said that in creating the plan over the last three years, federal leaders had dozens of public meetings in many cities and paid more than $1 million for further research.

"It's the most extensive outreach and research I've seen," said Morse, a 25-year veteran of public service.

The visitor limit is 19,900 visitors per day, just shy of the 20,900 peak estimated in 2011, Morse said. To keep an eye on crowding, park rangers will monitor the traffic and parking while communicating with park service employees about incoming visitors at the gates.

When the valley becomes too congested, cars will be diverted to a new parking area on the west end of the valley, Morse said. Or visitors can go to other parts of Yosemite, including Glacier Point or Tuolumne Meadows.

Gate closures and day-use permits are not among the features in the preferred alternative of the draft environmental

document.

Morse said day-use parking will increase from 2,337 spaces to 2,448, and campsites would go from 466 to 640. About 200 acres of meadows and riverside areas will be restored, she said.

The pedestrian underpass at Northside Drive will eliminate a bottleneck that backs up traffic as people cross the street from Yosemite Lodge to view Yosemite Falls.

“The concern is not that there is too much traffic,” Morse said. “It’s a bad intersection because a lot of vehicles leaving the valley must pass through.”

Missing snowboarder spent the night at a hotel

Updated Jan. 10 11:45am

A missing snowboarder from Gardnerville said he spent the night at the Horizon hotel-casino with an acquaintance.

He called his dad about 9am Thursday to say he was fine. According to deputies who spoke with Corey Hoffman, he was unaware a search had started the previous evening at Heavenly Mountain Resort.

“After a lengthy interview with Corey and his brother who had reported him missing, we are unable to determine exactly what transpired,” Douglas County Undersheriff Paul Howell said in a statement. “The details are conflicting due to the consumption of alcohol.”

Hoffman claims he and his brother became separated at a bar in

the Heavenly Village. The brother believes they became separated on the mountain.

The sheriff's department reports the search involved 75 people from several jurisdictions and volunteer organizations, and two helicopters at an estimated to cost $40,000.

"More importantly in needlessly risked the safety of search and rescue personnel who conducted this search in bad weather and hazardous terrain," Howell said.

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Updated: Jan. 10 10:25am

Missing snowboarder Corey Hoffman has been found alive. More details to come.

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Weather and avalanche conditions are hampering efforts to locate a Gardnerville man on Heavenly Mountain Resort.

Corey Hoffman, 24, was snowboarding with his brother Jan. 9 when they got separated. Hoffman has not been seen since Wednesday afternoon.

Douglas County sheriff's deputies believe he is still on the mountain because Hoffman's vehicle was located in the parking lot of the resort. The man's cell phone was found in the vehicle.

Rescue teams plan to concentrate on the Mott Canyon and Daggett Creek drainages on the east slope and the in-bound ski areas near Stagecoach Lodge. Because Hoffman was boarding in and out of bounds Wednesday search efforts will include both in and out of bound areas.

Hoffman was wearing black snow pants, black sweat shirt, and brown hat with fur trim and black boots. He has an orange

Camelback pack and has a red snowboard.

Douglas County Search and Rescue, El Dorado County SAR and Heavenly ski patrol searched throughout the night. Their efforts have been hampered by snow, wind, and avalanche danger.

Washoe County Sheriff's Office and Tahoe Nordic will join the effort today. It's possible a Navy search helicopter from NAS Fallon will be part of the search.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

FDA proposes sweeping new food safety rules

By Neela Banerjee and Alana Semuels, Los Angeles Times

The Food and Drug Administration has proposed sweeping rules to curtail food-borne illnesses that kill thousands of Americans annually – and, in the process, to transform itself into an agency that prevents contamination, not one that merely investigates outbreaks.

The rules, drafted with an eye toward strict standards in California and some other states, enable the implementation of the landmark Food Safety Modernization Act that President Obama signed two years ago in response to a string of deadly outbreaks of illness from contaminated spinach, eggs, peanut butter and imported produce.

The first proposed rule would require domestic and overseas producers of food sold in the U.S. to craft a plan to prevent and deal with contamination of their products. The plans would

be open to federal audits. The second rule would address contamination of fruit and vegetables during harvesting.

One in six Americans suffers from a food-borne illness annually, a “substantial burden” on the country, according to the FDA. Of those who get sick, about 130,000 end up hospitalized and 3,000 die.

A salmonella outbreak in peanut butter last fall prompted the FDA to shut down a New Mexico production facility of Sunland Inc. and initiate a mass recall from retailers such as Trader Joe’s. A listeria outbreak in several states last year also killed dozens of people.

“The FDA Food Safety Modernization Act is a common-sense law that shifts the food safety focus from reactive to preventive,” Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said Friday in releasing the proposals.

The outbreaks of the last several years pushed consumer advocates and much of the food industry to back more stringent standards.

Many welcomed the proposed rules, although consumer advocates pointed out that the standards were delayed in the White House a year past their congressionally mandated due date, giving rise to concerns that the Obama administration sought to avoid any political fallout in an election year.

The 2011 food safety act, the most comprehensive overhaul of the food industry in 70 years, was to be built on three sets of regulations, not just the two issued Friday, said Caroline Smith DeWaal, food safety director at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a Washington consumer advocacy group.

The third rule, which has yet to be issued, would establish how food importers would verify that the products they bring in meet U.S. standards.

Last year more than 800 cases of illness were caused in the U.S. by contaminated imported tuna flakes, cantaloupes, mangoes and ricotta cheese, DeWaal said, citing data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“It’s supposed to be a three-legged stool in terms of consumer protection,” DeWaal said, “and one leg is still missing.”

The FDA said developing the complex new rules took time as it consulted “consumers, government, industry, researchers and many others,” and “studied, among many other sources, the California leafy greens marketing agreement.” Additional rules will “follow soon,” the agency said.

The California Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement, formed in 2007 after an E.coli outbreak tied to spinach crops, mandates that farmers fund government audits of their food safety processes. Melon growers in California have a similar agreement and last year made it mandatory, said Stephen Patricio, president of Westside Produce in Firebaugh which grows, packs and ships melons.

“California has the most stringent requirements,” Patricio said. “It’s the culture of food safety that is important, and California farmers have been working on the culture of food safety for a decade.”

As a result, the proposed federal regulations aren’t expected to force substantial changes in the way many crops in California are handled. Melons in the state also have a mandatory code on every box that is shipped that would allow authorities to track where the fruit came from and when it was harvested, a policy that was proposed in the new regulations.

Eric Hanagan already has implemented some of the policies suggested in the proposed guidelines.

Hanagan’s 1,500-acre farm, which grows melons and vegetables in the Rocky Ford area of Colorado, was hit hard when a nearby

farm was blamed for a 2011 listeria outbreak that killed 25 people. In response, Hanagan and other farmers adopted rules that they hoped would restore the region's reputation.

His vegetables are now shipped with codes that allow them to be tracked, and every winter he and other regional farmers go to classes about food safety. Hanagan's farm is inspected twice a year by the state, one of the inspections unannounced. Inspectors talk to each worker individually and regulate what kind of shoes, clothes and jewelry they can wear.

Hanagan estimates that the regulations cost medium-sized farms about $5,000 to $7,500 a year, which includes the cost of time for training workers and attending classes. But, he said, it's worth every penny.

"We need to have safe food, because if you get a consumer sick, you're done," he said. Jensen Farms, the Colorado farm blamed for the listeria outbreak, filed for bankruptcy in May.

The FDA will gather public comment for 120 days before finalizing the rules. Large farms would have 26 months to comply with most of the new requirements after the final rules are published; smaller farms would have longer.

Ski report: Fresh snow

Most resorts reporting more than a half foot of fresh snow.

Here is the Jan. 10 ski report.

– Curtis Fong

Grant helps Washoe County deputies fight cyber crimes

The Washoe County Sheriff's Office has received a $35,000 award from the FBI to cover overtime costs related to the sheriff's Cyber Crimes Unit and Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force.

The FBI award enhances the ability of detectives to timely investigate crimes against children on the Internet.

For more information about cyber security, the Sheriff's Internet Crimes against Children Task Force, and tips that help keep children safe while on the Internet, go online.

DCSD wins decision to negotiate step increases

By Anne Knowles

MINDEN – Some Douglas County School District support staff have to wait another month to receive pay increases due them since July 2012.

The county's school district board of trustees was scheduled

this week to vote on ratification of a long-negotiated contract agreement with the Douglas County Support Staff Organization, which is the bargaining unit representing 240 secretaries, food service, custodial personnel and other support staff.

The yearlong negotiations ended up in arbitration when the two parties could not agree on employees so-called step increases, or salary increases, which in the past were automatically triggered when employees met certain time-related milestones.

“Since 1996, they’ve been given to us and have never before been part of the negotiations,” Nancy Hamlett, the organization’s president, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Contract discussions dragged on last year, says Hamlett, over whether the step increases could be negotiated in every contract.

“If I were to rate the negotiations, I would give them an F,” said Hamlett.

After the parties could not come to an agreement at a July 9, 2012, meeting, the issue went to an arbitrator, who decided in the district’s favor. The decision is final and cannot be appealed. Arbitrator William E. Riker issued his decision Dec. 20.

The employee organization, though, has not had a chance to meet and vote on the contract since finding out the arbitration decision after the holiday break. The board of trustees always votes on contracts after the employees’ groups approve them. During the Jan. 8 board meeting, Neil Freitas and other board members said they were worried ratifying the contract first would set a bad precedent and could be misconstrued as trying to force employees into an agreement.

Hamlett said she could hold a vote within the week. Assuming the employees vote to approve, Sharla Hales, president of the board of trustees, said the item could be put on the consent calendar for the board's next meeting on Jan. 25. If the board approves the contract then, employees would receive their step increases in their paychecks issued Feb. 15.

Seventy-three support staff employees are due an average of a 5 percent pay increase. The term of the agreement is from July 1, 2011, to June 30, 2013.

Nevada is a right-to-work state so while the organization bargains for 240 employees, it has 137 members who can vote on the contract.

During Tuesday's meeting, after a closed-door session, the board of trustees also voted to approve an agreement with three types of non-represented employees – confidential employees, classified supervisory and professional employees. The first two don't receive any pay increase, but step and longevity will be paid through 2013 retroactive to July 1, 2012. The professional agreement is from 2011-16 and any pay increases will be based on individual performance.

In other action:

• The board was told no offers were made to buy the Kingsbury Middle School so the Stateline building will remain on the market. The board may accept the highest qualified bid at or above $4 million, the property's appraised value.

Opinion: Congress is failing to help Postal Service

By Patrick Donahoe

The 112th Congress adjourned without having passed postal legislation. Such legislation could quickly restore the Postal Service to profitability and put the organization on a stable, long-term financial footing. This lack of action is disappointing.

The Postal Service has worked closely with the Congress over the past two years to advance a framework for a viable business model that will allow us to quickly respond to the evolving needs of our customers. As a result of frequent communication with Congressional leaders, we have modified important parts of our five-year comprehensive business plan, including the pace of consolidation of mail processing facilities, to give Congress maximum flexibility to make needed legislative changes.

Unfortunately, Congress has not enacted these changes.

As we sought to provide solutions to enable legislative change, we pursued cost-reducing and revenue-generating activities.

Over the past two years we have reduced head count by approximately 60,000 career employees. We have consolidated 70 of our mail processing facilities. We moved to reduce hours at many of our post offices. We also have worked to substantially increase our package volume along with introducing a same-day delivery service.

As we look to the coming year, we are on an unsustainable financial path. We are currently losing $25 million per day, we have defaulted on $11.1 billion in Treasury payments and exhausted our borrowing authority.

The Postal Service should not have to do business this way, which has undermined the confidence of our customer base and the $800 billion mailing industry we serve.

We will be discussing with our Board of Governors a range of accelerated cost cutting and revenue generating measures designed to provide us some financial breathing room.

We encourage the new 113th Congress to make postal reform an urgent priority, and to work steadily toward the quick passage of reform legislation. We will continue to work with leaders of our House and Senate oversight committees and all members of Congress to help make this happen.

Patrick Donahoe is the postmaster general.