Destructive mussel found in SoCal lake

By Jim Holt, Santa Clarita Valley Signal

Fresh-water mussels that can cause millions of dollars in waterway and pipeline damage have invaded Lake Piru, putting park officials at nearby Castaic Lake on heightened alert, state and county officials said Monday.

The discovery marks the first time the destructive mollusks, called quagga or zebra mussels, have been found in a Southern California water body that does not receive water from the Colorado River.

Lake Piru Recreation Area staff reported the discovery of potential quagga mussels to Fish and Wildlife officials on Dec. 18.

Read the whole story

Ski report: Get the first runs of 2013



All roads and mountain passes are open with no restrictions. Buckle up and drive safely to your favorite resort.

Here is the New Year’s Day ski report.

— Curtis Fong

North Shore biomass facility gets OK by planning commissioners

Placer County planning commissioners in late December approved a conditional use permit and certified the environmental impact report for a proposed biomass facility between Tahoe City and Truckee.

The project includes a 2 megawatt facility that will use woody biomass from the surrounding forests to create energy.

The project will be located on county owned property at the Cabin Creek materials recycling facility off Highway 89 near the Placer/Nevada county border. The facility will use gasification technology to convert the biomass material into a synthesis gas, which would then be used as fuel for an internal combustion engine/generator that would produce electricity.

An 11,000-square foot building would be built to house the power generating and emissions control equipment and a 1-acre fuel storage area.

Biomass currently being removed from surrounding U.S. Forest Service, state and private land for wildfire fuel reduction efforts would be taken to this facility.

Instead of burning the material it would be converted into gas, which in turn will power an internal combustion engine that would turn turbines to produce electricity.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Sierra Avalanche Center workers to give lecture

The North Lake Tahoe Chamber/CVB/Resort Association kicks off its free First Fridays with Getting to Know the Basin Better.

The Sierra Avalanche Center will discuss how employees evaluate avalanche danger, how to use their website to assist those planning to ski and board in the backcountry, and how the public can support the center's efforts.

The Jan. 9 event is from 5:30-7pm at the North Lake Tahoe Visitors Center, 100 North Lake Blvd., Tahoe City. This had originally been scheduled for Jan. 4

The events will profile speakers knowledgeable about the Lake Tahoe Basin.

On Feb. 1, Lake Tahoe writer Mark McLaughlin weaves tales of love about the Sierra Nevada.

To learn more about First Fridays or for additional information, contact North Lake Tahoe Visitors Center manager Kym Fabel at (530) 581.6900.

Editorial: Stop the name calling or the comment section on Lake Tahoe News will go away

The world seems to be in a sad, angry and distrustful state of mind.



We live in a time when in 2012 more active U.S. troops took their lives than died fighting in Afghanistan, according to the Military Suicide Report.

In 2012, 70 journalists died. The record was 74 in 2009. That might not sound like much, but there was a time when journalists' notebooks were like a white flag of neutrality. Not so anymore. These unarmed chroniclers of truth are seen as having an even more dangerous weapon than a gun – that of a pen, a computer, a microphone, a cell phone.

While journalists have long been held in low-esteem right along with attorneys, the fourth estate has also had a special status of being a non-combatant. Not so much anymore.

We are hurting each other with weapons and words.

People say they hate all the negative news. We say there is no such thing as negative or positive news – there is just news.

However, *Lake Tahoe News* knows we are bringing a good deal of negativity to you via the comments.

Without counting the positive, negative and neutral comments on *Lake Tahoe News*, we know the negative run rampant and

overshadow and the other comments. The negativity isn't what is so grating and unnerving, it's the anger and venom that are spewed that are both disheartening and alarming.

No one is going to agree with everyone all of the time. But that doesn't make the other person's opinion less valid. Nor does it make that person an idiot or some other name for having that opinion.

Sure, it's easy to tell someone to not read the comments if they don't like what is being said. But isn't that in some way punishing the people who want to contribute in a meaningful way and rewarding the nasty commenters?

Lake Tahoe News, and any site for that matter, does not have to allow comments. We've done a lot of thinking about whether comments are good or bad for the news site. For now, the good outweighs the bad. We like when conversations are elevated, new information is brought forward and divergent opinions are presented in a thoughtful manner.

But as we go forward with a redesign of the news site, we are giving serious thought to not allowing comments in the future. It will be up to the commenters – basically how you behave between now and when we pull the trigger on the redesign – as to whether comments will be a component in the next incarnation.

The turning of a calendar for many is all about resolutions. For *Lake Tahoe News* we would like to not be able to write the first sentence of this editorial a year from now. We'll do our part to make that possible, if you will do yours.

Is it that hard to do unto others as you would want done to you? Is it that hard to voice your opinion about a topic without being critical of someone else? Why can't you just write: I disagree with *Lake Tahoe News* because … and then leave it at that.

Happy New Year from everyone at *Lake Tahoe News*!

Outlook good for real estate in Tahoe-Reno for 2013

By Anne Knowles, Northern Nevada Business Weekly

Real estate professionals are hopeful a recovery in the Northern Nevada residential market that began to take hold in 2012 will take off in 2013.

“We had our strongest sales since 2005,” says Helen Graham, president-elect of the Reno-Sparks Association of Realtors and an agent with Keller Williams Realty in Reno. “Optimism is high. We see all the trends going in the right direction.”

In the first 10 months of 2012, sales of existing single-family homes in Washoe County increased 5 percent, from 4,892 in 2011 to 5,057, according to the association.

The median home price in October rose 23 percent to $181,750 from the same month a year earlier. In October, 338 existing single family homes in Reno sold, a 2 percent increase from the 2011 and a 9 percent jump from September; 170 sold in Sparks, a 13 percent gain from a year earlier and a 12 percent bump from the previous month; and in Fernley 48 homes sold, a 12 percent increase from last year a 30 percent rise from September. The low end of the market is doing better than the high end, says Graham.

“There’s a two-week supply for houses priced $100,000 to $199,000 and 4.9 months of inventory for homes priced at $400,000,” she says. “The higher the price, needless to say, the higher inventory we have.”

Graham attributes that in part to a tightening in credit, making it more difficult for potential buyers to qualify for pricier properties.

She says real estates and brokers have other concerns about the year ahead, including the effect of any tax changes now being worked out in Washington, the expiration of the federal debt-forgiveness bill, which exempts homeowners from taxes owed on mortgage debt forgiven by banks during short sales or foreclosures, and Nevada’s Assembly Bill 284, the 2011 robo-signing bill that resulted in a drop of bank notices of defaults on homes and fewer foreclosure properties on the market. Graham, as well as others, is confident interest rates on home loans will remain at rock bottom.

“We really do expect rates to stay historically low and not rise not until 2014,” says Graham. “Even then we’re only expecting them to rise to 4 percent.”

Carson City is reporting similar trends. Through Dec. 12, 657 single family homes were sold there, a 12 percent jump from 585 sales in the same, nearly 12-month period in 2011, according to Heidi McFadden, president of the Sierra Nevada Association of Realtors and an agent with Realty Executives. The median home price in 2011 was $134,000 compared to $130,000 in 2012.

“I don’t want it to reflect that our prices have gone down. We have 75 more transactions this year than we did last year, which would change our median, obviously,” says McFadden. “Prices have stabilized and we’re seeing multiple offers on properties under $250,000. There is a demand for housing under this range.”

McFadden says she’s even seen a return of bidding wars at the low-end of the market, especially in Carson City and south Reno.

In Lake Tahoe, signs are positive, too. Sales of home rose 2 percent in the 12-month period from December 2010 to November 2011, and jumped 27 percent, to 731 sales, from December 2011 to November 2012, according to the South Tahoe Association of Realtors.

Meanwhile, the inventory of homes on the market has been cut almost in half in two years, from a 10.5-month supply in 2010 to 5.5-month supply in 2012.

The median home price for South Lake went from $228,000 in November 2011 to $289,500 last month, a 27 percent jump, while the average days on the market fell from 126 days to 108.

More laws to be imposed on Californians starting Jan. 1

By Patrick McGreevy, Los Angeles Times

SACRAMENTO – Californians will no longer be able to carry handguns openly in public, buy alcohol at self-serve checkout stands or purchase shark fins for their soup under hundreds of new laws that take effect Jan. 1.

Other measures bar minors from tanning beds, allow students to be suspended for cyber-bullying and require booster seats for children in cars until they are 8 years old or at least 4 feet, 9 inches tall.

Despite another year of budget shortfalls, the 760 bills that

Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law in 2011 included several that cost money. Among them: new funding for a bullet train and a campaign to boost enrollment for food stamps as the economy remains sluggish.

Some bills took effect immediately after the governor signed them. One allows an NFL stadium proposed for downtown Los Angeles to receive expedited legal review of any challenges over environmental issues. Another prohibits cities and counties from outlawing male circumcision.

Brown faced a backlash for signing some of the proposals, including one allowing illegal immigrants to receive private financial aid administered by California's public colleges. (Another permitting access to taxpayer-provided aid takes effect in 2013.)

Known as the California Dream Act, the pair of measures drew fire from the public and some lawmakers who consider them unfair to students born in the United States. But Assemblyman Gil Cedillo, D-Los Angeles, said his legislation recognizes the value of young people who graduate from high school in California regardless of where they were born.

"It's important for California and the future of our economy to take advantage of the investment we have made in these young men and women," Cedillo said.

Brown was also criticized for signing a law requiring public schools to include the contributions of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in history lessons and instructional material, although new textbooks for lower grades are not planned for three years.

One of the most contentious issues was the ban on the open carrying of handguns, which put California in the minority of states that have adopted such restrictions. Some gun-rights advocates say the new law will not keep them from appearing in public with weapons that are not covered by the ban.

“Law-abiding citizens will start openly carrying unloaded long guns in public because their basic and fundamental civil right to self-defense, as enumerated in the Second Amendment, is clearly being infringed upon,” said Yih-Chau Chang, a spokesman for the firearms advocacy group Responsible Citizens of California.

Assemblyman Anthony Portantino, D-La Canada Flintridge, said he introduced the measure in response to law enforcement officials who felt that public safety was jeopardized by gun owners wearing firearms on their hips at coffee shops and other public venues as they called attention to a right to bear arms.

Laws taking effect also include:

Athlete safety: requires school districts to develop a process for identifying cases in which students suffer concussions in sports mishaps and require a parent to give written permission for the athlete to return to the lineup.

Audits: gives the state auditor broad new powers to investigate misuse of taxpayer funds by cities and counties, in response to the financial scandal in the city of Bell.

Autism: requires health insurers to include coverage for autism.

Baby food: bans stores from selling expired infant food and formula.

Bail: requires that people extradited to California to face criminal charges face $100,000 in bail in addition to any bail already issued for the underlying offense.

Ballot measures: requires all ballot initiatives and referenda to be decided in November general elections, which typically have higher turnout – and more liberal voters casting ballots – than do June primaries. Excludes measures placed on the

ballot by the Legislature.

Beer: bars the importation, production and sale of beer to which caffeine has been directly added as a separate ingredient, in response to incidents in which young people have been hospitalized with severe intoxication after drinking the beverages.

Bullet train: provides $4 million for planning work on a section of a high-speed rail system proposed between Los Angeles and San Diego.

Child actors: streamlines the process for obtaining state permission for minors to work in the entertainment industry by allowing parents to get temporary permits online rather than through the mail.

Clemency: requires governors to give prosecutors a chance to weigh in at least 10 days before acting on requests for commutation of prison terms. The law was proposed after former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger acted on his last day in office to reduce a prison sentence for the son of former Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez.

Cyber-bullying: allows schools to suspend students for bullying classmates on social networking sites such as Facebook.

NHP offering updates through social media

The Nevada Highway Patrol is implementing an alert system using Facebook, Twitter and Nixle.

Nixle’s technology has been referred to as the “best of breed” for authorized users and ensures credibility of information delivered to the residents and visitors to Nevada, according to the NHP.

Go online to sign up for Nevada Highway Patrol alerts using Nixle.

Letter: South Tahoe snow removal is atrocious

To the community,

The snow removal in the city is unbelievable. I was in the area Sunday and was ashamed of the snow removal that has been done, or should I say not done.

The roads are narrow and the pack on the streets is unacceptable. There were no plows out and the roads should have been blown by now to there fullest width.

I went by the city yard and the rotaries didn’t even have chains on them. I am amazed that there have been no comments in the paper yet.

When driving around the county areas I found that all of there blowers were out and all of there graders were out and the streets out there looked real good. It used to be that when it snowed the crews went to work and worked 24 hours a day until all streets were at full width and we were ready for the next storm. If the city were to get another storm right now of any size, the city would not be ready and there will be hell to pay from the citizens.

I don’t know who is calling the shots in the Public Works Department, but they had better get there head out of there pocket and wake up. Is there no one there that knows how to peel the pack off of the streets? The city has the finest equipment with the cat graders and the front plows that should be being used to push back the streets to full width and remove all the pack.

The most important function in the city is snow removal. Without it the police and fire departments can not do there duty and the citizens and above all the tourist that bring the money will have a very bad taste of the city services.

I served 28 years in the Public Works Division and 21 of those as street superintendent and never in our worst years did I ever see the area in the city this bad.

What are they going to do if they get a real storm soon?

Thomas Fay, Arizona

California wants to find owners of millions of dollars worth of goods

By Claudia Buck, Sacramento Bee

It’s a cross between grandma’s attic and Fort Knox.

In a tiny, unmarked room inside the state’s unclaimed property office in Rancho Cordova, there’s a veritable treasure trove just waiting for the right people to claim it.

Set up like a department store jewelry counter, the 200-square-foot room is rimmed with glass cases displaying an eye-popping, yet oddball, collection of unclaimed goods.

There's everything from a well-aged bottle of cognac to Hank Aaron baseball cards, from glittering diamonds and jade jewelry to American Indian beaded belts, from a $100,000 stack of gold ingots to a single sardine can.

All of it belongs to Californians who either died or simply forgot about a long-ago safe deposit box.

And collectively, it represents just a fraction of the $6.1 billion in money and property that California is holding until the rightful owners come forward.

Standing amid the abandoned riches one recent weekday, state Controller John Chiang said his mission is simple: to get rid of it. "Our first objective … is to reunite people with their property," he said.

Over the past six years, Chiang's office has ramped up its efforts to do so. In fiscal year 2011, it sent more than 1 million notices to Californians that their property was about to be sent to the state. In that same period, it took in $557 million and returned $207 million to claimants.

By law, unclaimed property – from banks, financial institutions, utilities and other money holders – must be transferred to the state for safekeeping if there's been no activity on an account for three years. That includes stock shares, uncashed payroll checks, utility refunds, life insurance payouts. It's intended to prevent banks or others from taking unclaimed funds into their own accounts.

Chiang says it's not surprising that so much winds up in the state's hands. The popular TV show "Storage Wars," where the contents of unclaimed storage units are auctioned off, is telling, he says. "People have a lot of stuff and it's easy to

lose track of."

Since 2003, the state no longer auctions off the contents of safe deposit boxes or other property.

Some of what's been abandoned is purely sentimental: crocheted baby booties, children's books and sepia-toned family photographs.

Some is pop-cultural: a 1988 Michael Jackson concert ticket; old Hollywood movie star photos of Clint Eastwood, Marilyn Monroe, John Travolta, the Marx Brothers.

Some is historical: a Civil War diary; an 1865 New York Herald announcing President Abraham Lincoln's assassination; an early 1900s check from the Bank of Italy's Sacramento branch; a 1906 newspaper headlined "SF in Ruins" printed on the only press to survive the earthquake; a letter from a nuclear engineer aboard the USS Nautilus, the first submarine to reach the North Pole.

And, of course, hundreds of baseball, basketball and football trading cards, from Mickey Mantle to Gale Sayers to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

And it's not just California that's sitting on unclaimed property. Nationwide, about $41.7 billion is waiting to be returned, according to the National Association of Unclaimed Property Administrators. In fiscal 2011, 2.5 million claims worth $2.25 billion were returned to owners nationwide.

In California, most of the financial accounts are turned over to the state in June and December. Safe deposit boxes – about 4,000 a year – are turned over on a bank-by-bank schedule. Just last week, a box yielded a collection of Robert Kennedy campaign photos from the 1960s.

All of the property is either in a highly secured vault room or the tiny display space, both of which are accessed only

through multiple locked doors. Entry requires dual key swipes by two employees. Once inside, surveillance cameras monitor every movement.

But while the storage area is virtually impenetrable, it's easy for anyone to search for unclaimed property, in California or other states.

And just about anyone could be on the state's list. Former first lady Maria Shriver has $12.17 in unclaimed wages from Sony Pictures Entertainment. Gov. Jerry Brown has 18 shares of U.S. Bancorp stock, plus $61.26 in fractional shares, waiting for him to claim.

"I'm sure we have sent a notice to him," said Gary Qualset, unclaimed property division chief. He said Capitol officials and legislators as well as local governments get alerted to unclaimed property.

Until the owners file their claims, all money stays in the state's general fund. Since 2003, the state no longer pays interest on funds it holds. Shares of stock and mutual funds are cashed out after 18 months and the proceeds held.

With a staff of 250, the state's unclaimed property office issues payouts daily to individuals and institutions. Last year, the average return was $728.

Amounts vary from as small as $1 to one of the largest: a pair of solid-gold candlesticks valued at about $1 million that were left in an elderly couple's safe deposit box. The couple's intended heir: the University of California system and UCLA's nursing school. After UC's ownership was established, an armored car came to collect the candlesticks, Qualset said.

Controller Chiang says his most memorable return was a Medal of Honor that was awarded by President Harry Truman to a World War II Navy officer for heroism during the bombing of Pearl

Harbor. The medal sat in his late daughter's safe deposit for years, until it was transferred to the state in 2006. After locating the officer's extended family members, the medal was returned to them at a Navy ceremony in San Diego.

Some consumers have complained that the process to reclaim their property is cumbersome and not worth the effort.

But Chiang said there's a reason that verification is strict: "We're seeing increasing instances of fraud," he said, by people using forged documents. Sometimes, a legitimate heir comes forward to claim a parent's money but conveniently forgets there are siblings entitled to a share.

In all cases, the state does extensive research and requires proof of ownership, such as Social Security numbers and certified death certificates.

There's no fee or charge for calling California's unclaimed property unit or using its "claimit.ca.gov" website. But so-called "asset locators" or "heir finders" will offer to find and claim property for you – for a fee. By law, they cannot charge more than 10 percent of the returned property's value.

Clearly, at $6.1 billion, there's still a lot of stuff in the state's attic.

"The goal is to return it all," said Qualset. "That's what all the staff is working on since 1959."