Nevada-centric bills languishing in Congress

By Karoun Demirjian, Las Vegas Sun

With only a few weeks left in the congressional session, it's do-or-die time for two years' worth of bills Nevada lawmakers have filed to fix local problems that need federal attention.

There are pending bills to free up federal lands for mining and declare other sections of the state as wilderness. There are bills-in-waiting to mitigate unemployment and homelessness for veterans. There is lingering legislation to help with mortgage modification. And that's not even counting online poker – which technically doesn't count because a bill hasn't been officially filed.

To pass all these measures is an impossible task: They are competing with thousands of other pieces of legislation – not to mention a little thing called the fiscal cliff – for attention before the holidays.

That means the Nevada delegation must pick their favorites, then plead their case with those who have the power to push them through in the last few weeks.

"To just say, 'Hey I introduced your bill, have a nice day,' well that is a nice piece of paper, but you should be moving this through and getting it done," said Rep. Mark Amodei, R-Nev. "So I'm putting all my cards on the table and going as hard as I can."

Luckily, the chief operator at the helm of the process is also a Nevadan: Sen. Harry Reid.

This week, Reps. Joe Heck and Shelley Berkley had private meetings with the senior senator, in which they urged him to

do everything in his power to move local Nevada bills – especially the many public-lands bills that have been collecting dust on the Senate calendar for many months.

“Sen. Reid’s always been upfront with me,” said Heck, who has four bills he’s prioritized as must-do: Two on veterans affairs and two on public lands, to authorize the Three Kids Mine cleanup and the Mesquite land conveyance. “There are several issues, none of which I think are insurmountable.”

Nevada representatives report the obstacles they have encountered to their bills are usually the result of some philosophical hangup or an unfamiliarity with Nevada’s unique relationship with the federal government – especially when it comes to public lands.

“Any time you give federal land back to a state, that is considered an earmark, even if they’re paying a fair market value for it,” Heck said.

When it comes to public-lands issues, there is remarkably little disagreement within the Nevada delegation, which has become expert at making successful tradeoffs of exploitable and conservation lands.

The pending bills include one to sell 10,400 acres of BLM land to the city of Yerington to develop a copper mine, a bill to hand over about 1,000 acres of BLM land to aid in the cleanup of the Three Kids Mine in Henderson, and bills to designate the Pine Forest Range, north of Winnemucca, a wilderness area.

This year, if all the Nevada public-lands bills were to pass, the trade would be 15,000 acres for mining and 75,000 acres for wilderness, according to Amodei, who as representative of the rural districts has filed the lion’s share of public-lands bills.

But federal-lands matters aren’t just up to the Nevada delegation.

This year, the fate of Nevada's lands bills is tied up with that of lands bills in general. Three Kids Mine, Mesquite, and the more highly publicized Yerington Land Conveyance and Pine Forest bills have all, for the moment, been rolled into one large public-lands package that incorporates projects in Nevada and other states.

Republican Sen. Tom Coburn of Oklahoma, who has a habit of placing holds on public-lands bills, has objected to it.

"I just don't believe we should be giving the federal government any more land," Coburn told the Sun this week.

Reid ultimately controls the calendar of what gets taken up in the Senate. But the Senate's practice of holds – where a single senator can block progress on a piece of legislation – means that authority can be quickly undermined.

"Even though (Reid's) the majority leader, there's only so much he can do in the Senate. And so if there are issues on my side of the aisle, it's hard for him to impact those," Heck said. "So that's where I got engaged more heavily."

Nevada's lawmakers are skeptical that Coburn's objections have more to do with his made-in-Oklahoma opinions about federal land – less than 4 percent of Oklahoma is owned by the federal government compared with about 85 percent in Nevada – than it does with the particulars of the Silver State projects proposed.

"The vast majority of these bills, they're paying for themselves. So if you've got issues with them, tell us what they are," Amodei said. "I was thinking of calling (former Sen. John) Ensign up and saying, hey, what's up with Coburn? They did live together. … I haven't decided if I'm going to do that. Probably not."

Amodei is kicking himself about not directly approaching Reid earlier to hash out a way to shuttle at least some Nevada

lands bills – primarily Yerington and Pine Forest – through before Coburn got in the way.

“I do recall that he’s the majority leader and that they do have things on the radar screen that might be a little higher than this,” Amodei said. “But I’m not going back to Winnemucca and saying, ‘Hey guess what? … Congratulations, you’ve done everything right, but you’ve got nothing to show for it.’”

Coburn isn’t the only hold-up to the Nevada delegation’s final-week ambitions. Heck said he also has been having trouble getting two veterans bills that passed the House up in the Senate. He is running up against senators with similar legislation that don’t seem too keen on working with him to close the loop.

One is Heck’s Stolen Valor bill; Sen. Jim Webb has similar legislation in the Senate.

“His version unfortunately won’t meet constitutional muster,” Heck said. “We’re trying to work with his office to say, ‘Why don’t you just take ours?’ I’ve had a hard time tracking him down. I might have to go stake out his office.”

A spokeswoman for Webb said she was aware of Heck’s bill but did not respond to a request for comment Friday afternoon.

Heck also has a bill to mitigate veteran homelessness. A spokeswoman for Reid said Friday that he expected the Senate would vote on legislation written by Rhode Island Sen. Jack Reed.

For those who have been in Congress for a while, this sort of last minute pileup is par for the course.

But the newer members of the delegation – especially those in the House – find the slow pace of getting local bills through Congress baffling.

“I’m surprised,” Heck said of his veterans bill. “I don’t

think I was naive, but when a bill passes out 410 to 3, you'd think that it was a slam dunk."

Amodei said: "The Yerington bill … it was here before me. … Seriously? It shouldn't take years and years and years. Does it cure the ills of cancer? No, but hey, this is a big step, this is a good thing to do regionally and you don't have to take a bath as the federal government to do it."

Over the next few weeks they will watch, and wait, until the final hours of the 112th Senate, when Reid will rattle off the bill numbers of the measures he's managed to reach unanimous consent on in the Senate.

And they will hope that Reid exercises a little home-state advantage.

"These bills are priorities for Sen. Reid," said his spokeswoman, Kristen Orthman. "He will work hard with the Nevada delegation to get them done."

Library to helps kids make gingerbread houses

Sweets will be featured at the Douglas County Public Library in Zephyr Cove on Dec. 15 at 1pm.

Miss Carol will be on hand to help children build gingerbread houses using graham crackers and other sweets. Children and parents are welcome.

This program is limited to 30 children. Register by Dec. 12 to attend. Participants will be asked to choose a donation from a list of supplies for the program. Supplies must be delivered

to the library before 5pm Dec. 13.

This event is sponsored by the Friends of the Douglas County Public Library. The library is located at 233 Warrior Way in Zephyr Cove.

For more info, call (775) 588.6411.

Caltrans Meyers' enclave becomes a village of seasonal workers sleeping and eating onsite

By Kathryn Reed

MEYERS – Aromas of freshly made food waft from a nondescript building tucked off Highway 89. Three hot meals a day are served here. Boarders are upstairs sleeping – in the middle of day.

Today starts week four of winter at the Meyers' Caltrans depot.

When it's storming out – and it doesn't have to be white stuff that is falling from the sky – the heavy equipment operators are working 12-hour shifts. There may be no time for breaks.

"Anything dealing with our highways we take care of," Mark Wagener explains during lunch Dec. 5. "There's so much sand on the road we have to clean the catch basins regularly."



Twelve-hour shifts at the Caltrans kitchen in Meyers are routine for Claire Neville. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Rocks are sliding on the road and storm drains are backed up. Most of the mop up is done by hand.

When it’s snowing, Wagener is in a plow truck or grader.

This seasonal facility usually operates from sometime in November through April. Though there was the year it opened in October.

Any city, county, state or federal employee can eat here. Lake Valley personnel and California Highway Patrol officers are dining on Dec. 5. Each meal is $4.

The lunch crew can put sack lunches together so workers stay nourished throughout their shift.

On Wednesday, heavy equipment mechanic Walt Wimsett and Wagener are relishing the meal in front of them as they sit in the dining area that seems a bit like a cafeteria. The difference is the quality of food.

“This is the best meatloaf I’ve ever had,” Wimsett says. “This reminds me of the cooking I grew up with.”

Real mashed potatoes and green beans are also on his plate. Pudding is available for dessert.

Wagener enjoys fish Fridays the most. He said the choice of a half dozen items from shrimp to salmon to chowder keeps him filled up.

Keeping workers fed

Dennis Russo has been cooking here since 1996 – having been a cook for nearly 50 years. Caltrans has 15 cooks in the state – mostly in snow country. The closest facilities like this to Tahoe are the one at Caples Lake and the two on Interstate 80.

Russo has three people helping him make sure there is plenty of food for the crew. And like any restaurant, it's a bit of a guessing game to know how many mouths there will be to feed on any given day.

Russo said after a while he's gotten good at knowing the forecast and figuring out how many workers will be on duty.

It's a full commercial kitchen that is capable of producing meals for the masses.

Beef ribs with an Asian rub are on the counter. That's what was served for dinner last night.

Soup is always available. So are fresh fruit and a salad bar.

"We do cookies, cakes, pies. They are spoiled," Claire Neville, one of the cooks, says with a smile.

She said newbies to the Meyers' family – and a family is what they consider themselves – can gain 20 pounds in a season. Healthy and not so healthy items abound. For instance, on Wednesday homemade cinnamon rolls with frosting were whipped up for breakfast. But fresh fruit and yogurt are also available.

The breakfast sandwiches are one of the more popular items first thing in the morning.

Dinners run the gamut from pork, fish, beef – to steak about every 10 days. Burger bars, fresh chili over a hotdog, chicken Monterey and seven-spice chicken are some of the favorites.

Home away from home

Some of Caltrans' employees live nearby and go home at the end of their shift. More than a dozen are in town for the next six months.

Russo is one of them. He has a room upstairs. He calls Oakdale home the rest of the year.

Their quarters are sparse. Rooms are on the second and third floors, off hallways that look like a rundown hotel, or maybe an old college dorm. The worn brown carpet has seen better days. Rooms have twin beds, a sink, closet, dresser and old TV. Down the hall are the communal bathroom and laundry facility.

Towels and sheets are cleaned by a service, but clothing must be laundered by the individual.

On the first floor near the entrance is a break room of sorts. It doubles as a family room. A pool table, foosball, television and comfy couches fill the room.

"If it snows, there are no days off until the sun shines," Russo says.

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Missing Gardnerville couple located; 1 dead, 1 alive

By KOLO-TV

KOLO 8 News has been in contact with family of Roderick Clifton, one of two people missing in the Sierra since last Thursday.

His brother-in-law first informed KOLO 8 News Now that the couple Clifton and Paula Lane of Gardnerville had been found right around 8:30pm Wednesday. At 10pm he called our newsroom back to inform us that Roderick did not survive, but Paula Lane is alive.

The circumstances of their disappearance is not known at this point in time.

CHP Sgt. Joe Sherry told KOLO 8 News he was notified at 8:30pm Wednesday that, “A female subject had made contact with somebody at Sorensen’s Resort (in Hope Valley). She had said that they were in a collision. I don’t have a name on her.”

A lieutenant with the Citrus Heights Police Department tells us that his agency was called about 8:30pm saying, “We’ve got some preliminary information that we’re following up on from a different agency.”

Clifton’s brother-in-law informed KOLO 8 News the couple was being taken by Careflight to Carson-Tahoe Hospital.

Our ABC affiliate in Sacramento, News10.net, spoke with a friend of Paula Lane’s family. She told News10.net that Paula Lane’s mother is on her way to Carson-Tahoe Hospital.

Tahoe Fund helping put bike trail on the ground

Tahoe Fund wrote a check for $12,850 to the Tahoe Transportation District to be used for Rabe Meadow Bike Path.

This is part of the Stateline-to-Stateline bike trail.

The Rabe Meadow segment is the first section of the 3-mile segment that goes from Stateline to Round Hill Pines Resort.

The funding was contributed by private donors at the Tahoe Fund annual Founders Circle Summer Dinner in August, including the South Tahoe Alliance of Resorts.

The bike path includes environmentally sensitive design features, including boardwalks over wetland areas, and connections to major transit hubs.

Food waste a low priority for restaurants

By Eliza Barclay, NPR

A row of restaurants in the Cleveland Park neighborhood of Washington, D.C., looks tantalizing – there are Vietnamese, Italian, New American.

But if you walk around to the alley at the back of this row

you might gag.

Dumpsters packed with trash are lined up, and they get emptied only twice a week. Which means a lot of food sits here, filling the block with a deep, rank odor.

Some of the Dumpsters aren't properly sealed, so there are grease and putrid juices pooling beneath them. They may attract pigeons, rats, cockroaches, ants or flies, says Robert Corrigan, who runs the New York Rodent Control Academy. The academy trains restaurant workers on how to keep pests away. He says Dumpsters filled with restaurant garbage are one of the main reasons pests are multiplying across the country.

"Even a half a lemon that drops off a Dumpster and rolls underneath a stairwell – tiny flies will lay hundreds of thousands of eggs on that half a lemon," says Corrigan.

Even when the Dumpsters are emptied, the problem of food waste is just moved somewhere else. Dump trucks transport thousands of tons of food waste every day to landfills. That's where food waste becomes Jean Schwab's problem.

"Food waste is huge," says Schwab, a senior analyst in the waste division at the Environmental Protection Agency. "Food waste is now the No. 1 material that goes into landfills and incinerators."

Schwab says food waste from restaurants makes up 15 percent of all the food that ends up in landfills. And all that food doesn't just take up space and attract pests – it's also changing the climate.

"Because it rots so fast, basically it starts to generate methane really quickly," says Schwab.

Methane is a greenhouse gas that's 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide. And reducing methane emissions from sources like landfills is one of the Environmental Protection Agency's

biggest priorities in the fight against climate change.

But in spite of the fact that as much as 10 percent of the food a restaurant buys ends up in landfills, hardly anyone in the restaurant industry gives it a second thought.

“It’s just another thing we’re used to as a restaurant professional … the amount of garbage that’s thrown out on a nightly basis,” says Cruz Goler, head chef at Lupa, an Italian restaurant owned by Mario Batali in New York City. “It can be a little staggering, I guess, but that’s just what happens.”

Back in Cleveland Park, Logan Cox, executive chef of Ripple restaurant, says chefs obsess over the quality of their vegetables and their technique. They want to make sure everything looks and tastes just right. But food waste comes in low on the long list of priorities.

“I’ve never taken the time to weigh or measure how much we do throw away,” says Cox.

According to Jonathan Bloom, who wrote a book last year called American Wasteland, consumers are part of the problem, too. “There’s about a half-pound of food waste created per meal served,” says Bloom. “That’s taking into account both back- and front-of-the-house waste. So restaurants and the customers are both joining forces to waste a whole lot of food.”

About three cents of every dollar consumers spend on food away from home ends up in the trash. And that doesn’t even include the food left on your plate or the slimy lettuce forgotten in the fridge.

Chris Moyer of the National Restaurant Association says getting restaurants to focus on food waste is a big challenge. Food scraps, of course, are inevitable, but a lot of food waste is still edible.

The hardest part for many restaurants may just be getting the

workers to become aware of how much edible food they waste every day. A few years ago, when Moyer was managing a big chain restaurant, he wanted to show his cooks there were plenty of opportunities to reduce waste. So he took away the garbage can.

“You’d be surprised, once you take away the garbage cans, if people have to ask permission to throw something away how little you throw away,” says Moyer. “It was really quite amazing.”

But Moyer says getting the whole industry to take on food waste is going to take a lot of training and education – that’s what the NRA is trying to do with its ConServe program. And as we’ve reported, Unilever’s food division now has a program called United Against Waste.

But habits are harder to change than the menu.

“The hardest part about doing anything to benefit the planet, benefit your bottom line is behavioral change,” says Moyer. “Because that’s really what we’re talking about – changing mindsets, changing behaviors.”

75-watt lightbulb about to be permanently switched off

By Caroline Winter, Bloomberg Businessweek

The phaseout of traditional 100-watt incandescent lightbulbs in January – a move to meet new federal efficiency standards – struck panic in the hearts of some consumers.

Home Depot reported a nearly 20 percent spike in sales of 100-

watt bulbs for 2011 as people rushed to stockpile. At least one Ohio woman made sure to squirrel away enough bulbs to last 50 years.

A month from now, on Jan. 1, 2013, traditional incandescent 75-watt bulbs also will go the way of the dodo, as the second stage of the federal lightbulb phaseout goes into effect. This time around, however, shoppers seem more relaxed.

“Last year we saw some consumers buying up product, but that’s really slowed down,” says Bill Hamilton, president of lightbulb merchandising at Home Depot. “Customers are beginning to embrace the new technology.”

Hamilton says the initial rush to hoard traditional incandescent bulbs may have resulted from a reluctance to learn about alternatives.

“We’ve done some focus groups and customers have basically told us, ‘I haven’t had to think about lightbulbs or lighting for the last 100 years – don’t make me learn about it now,’ ” he says.

These days, customers have gotten over the hump and discovered numerous alternatives, including LEDs, compact fluorescents, and even incandescent bulbs that meet the federal requirement of being at least 25 percent more efficient.

It also doesn’t hurt that the retail price of energy-efficient bulbs has dropped by more than half over the past year, as companies perfected their technology and rolled out mass production, says Hamilton.

Not everyone has embraced the government’s energy-efficiency standards, which passed in 2007. Rep. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., who once declared, “I think Thomas Edison did a pretty patriotic thing for this country by inventing the lightbulb,” has sponsored the Light-Bulb Freedom of Choice Act to repeal the phaseout of incandescent bulbs. And in July, House

Republicans adopted a measure to halt the lightbulb-efficiency law.

“People are sick of the government treading where it just doesn’t belong,” said Rep. Michael Burgess, a Texas Republican who sponsored the lightbulb amendment that was added to a broader energy-spending bill.

The House measure is, in fact, an extension of a rider placed on the lightbulb law in December 2011, prohibiting the U.S. Department of Energy from using any funds to enforce the federal lightbulb law.

This means that, although such lighting manufacturers as General Electric and Royal Philips Electronics stopped making traditional 100-watt bulbs, there’s no guarantee that other companies would do the same. (The efficiency standards prohibit only the manufacturing and distribution of the lightbulbs, not their sale.)

“Some in Congress are willing to put U.S. jobs at risk for political positioning,” said Joseph Higbee, a spokesman for the National Electrical Manufacturers Association (NEMA). “This is an example of a few politicizing lightbulbs at the risk of American workers and the economy.”

Higbee says manufacturers are, in fact, supporting the efficiency legislation, which NEMA estimates could mean $10 billion to $15 billion worth of national energy savings per year. Companies such as GE and Philips, he says, have invested millions of dollars in developing alternative products, and they resent being left in limbo because of political infighting in Washington.

Higbee expects the rider preventing enforcement of lightbulb-efficiency laws will be dropped in 2013, and that the phaseout will continue into 2014, when the traditional 60-watt and 40-watt bulbs are scheduled to be discontinued.

The biggest shift for customers, meanwhile, will be learning the new lightbulb lingo. Instead of thinking in “watts,” which measure the amount of power going into a bulb, they henceforth must think in “lumens,” which measure the amount of light produced.

Explains Higbee: “A more efficient bulb will require fewer watts to produce the same amount of lumens as a less-efficient bulb.”

If this doesn’t make sense, don’t worry. Home Depot has spent plenty of time and money over the past year training employees to help customers find what they need.

“Articulating what’s best – what the advantages are in terms of energy, light output, quality and color – that’s really our biggest weapon,” says Hamilton.

For those who just don’t want to give up their trusty Edison bulbs, there’s always eBay. Hurry, while supplies last.

Caesars Entertainment on its way to offer online poker

By Steve Green, Las Vegas Sun

The online unit of Caesars Entertainment Corp. of Las Vegas today was recommended for licensure as an online intrastate poker operator in Nevada.

At a meeting in Carson City, the State Gaming Control Board voted to recommend a license for Caesars to the Nevada Gaming

Commission.

The commission could issue the license as early as later this month.

Caesars, which has the largest share of the U.S. physical casino market, plans to offer online poker with its World Series of Poker brand.

If approved, Caesars would be the 17th company licensed to participate in Nevada's emerging online poker sector. Some of the previously approved applicants are in the technical testing phases needed before going live.

Caesars, which is parent company of Harrah's and Harveys in Stateline, plans to launch online poker once its technical partner – 888 Holdings LLC Plc, a British online gaming firm – is licensed, possibly next year.

Mitch Garber, who heads Caesars' interactive division, said marketing and operational plans for online poker have been established.

"We are ready, the people are in place," he said.

The type of online poker approved so far in Nevada is not video poker as is commonly seen in casinos and bars. Instead, it's players competing against each other.

Loop road alternatives to be unveiled next week

The leading alternatives for the loop road through the South Shore as determined by attendees of two public workshops as

well as next steps will be presented by the Tahoe Transportation District at an open house on Dec. 13 from 4-6pm at Harveys, Emerald Bay B Room, Stateline.

Information on the various alternatives, including goals, benefits and associated costs will be presented.

For more info, call (775) 589.5500.

Guns a big seller on Black Friday

By Cathy Locke, Sacramento Bee

Toy and electronics stores weren't the only businesses racking up big sales numbers on Black Friday.

For area gun shops, the weekend after Thanksgiving is typically one of the busiest of the year. They saw even more sales this year after the re-election of President Obama, continuing a trend that occurred after he was first elected president.

"California is following pretty much the national trend," said Michelle Gregory, spokeswoman for the California Department of Justice, which keeps a record of dealer sales.

Gun sales typically increase after elections, and whenever gun lobbying groups suggest the possibility of gun control legislation.

This year, Black Friday gun sales were up 59 percent over from the same day a year ago, she said. The figure for transactions in November also showed a 49 percent increase over November

2011.

Adam Fahlbusch, manager of the Big Horn Gun Shop in the El Dorado County community of El Dorado, said the spike in sales during the past month exceeded those following the 2008 presidential election and Y2K, the beginning of the new millennium, when some people feared that computer crashes could lead to civil unrest.

He attributed the increase during the past month to a number of factors, including the presidential election, the economic climate, dwindling law enforcement and fallout from the state's prison realignment, as well as a proposed United Nations arms treaty.

The Arms Trade Treaty is intended to regulate global conventional arms trade. U.S. officials have said it would apply only to exports and have no effect on domestic gun sales and ownership.

But some gun enthusiasts fear it could lead to a reduction in firearms from overseas being sold in the United States.

Meanwhile, gun-control advocates have expressed disappointment that Obama hasn't pushed gun-control legislation. The issue received little attention during his first term and this year's presidential campaign. The 1994 ban on sales of certain types of semiautomatic weapons expired in 2004 and hasn't been reauthorized by Congress.

In California, handgun sales increased by 113,231, or 63 percent, from 2007 to 2011, according to dealer sales tallied by the state Department of Justice. Long gun sales increased by 117,373, or 62 percent, during the same period.

Handgun purchases and violent crime rates peaked statewide during the early 1990s. In 1993, California residents bought 433,822 handguns, compared with 293,421 purchased last year.

But postelection fears and holiday shopping fervor appear to have combined to give gun dealers a boost this year.

When Fahlbusch posted the day's sales with the Department of Justice on the Saturday before the Nov. 6 election, statewide firearms transactions for the 24-hour period were about 1,500, he said. For the following Saturday, the figure was more than 3,300, and for the Saturday after Thanksgiving, he said, approximately 9,700 transactions had been reported by 6pm.

"And they were open for another six hours," Fahlbusch said, explaining that the Department of Justice extended its hours until midnight Nov. 23-25 in anticipation of the higher than usual number of transactions.

Fahlbusch said about 75 percent of his customers have been purchasing firearms for personal and home protection.

Glen Ward, owner of Action Guns, in Rancho Cordova, however, said sales at his shop had remained pretty steady, with customers purchasing handguns for self-protection and recreation.

"They enjoy the art of shooting guns," he said.