Opinion: Collusion involved in California gas price spike?

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the Oct. 9, 2012, Los Angeles Times.***

California's record-breaking rise in gasoline prices over the last week was so sudden, and so apparently unjustified by the supply-and-demand factors that usually control markets, that it's natural to suspect some kind of conspiracy at play. Among the suspicious is Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., who sent a letter to the chairman of the Federal Trade Commission on Monday calling for an investigation.

Meanwhile, regardless of the spike's cause, Gov. Jerry Brown moved swiftly Sunday to implement a solution, asking state environmental regulators to allow early sales of California's winter-blend gasoline formula, which is cheaper but potentially more environmentally unfriendly than the summer blend. That was probably the right thing to do to help stave off serious economic harm. But in light of the conspiracy allegations and other factors, it also sets a worrisome precedent.

Are Californians the victims of market manipulation? That has been asked many times after sudden hikes in gas prices, but probes have turned up little or no evidence that companies intentionally restricted supplies. Because there are relatively few refineries that produce California's gasoline, which is cleaner but more expensive than blends sold nationwide, a slowdown here or there can have a dramatic impact on prices. The recent pain at the pump can be explained away as the result of an August fire that closed a big Chevron refinery in Richmond, a pipeline disruption and a power outage

that temporarily shut down an Exxon Mobil refinery in Torrance.

And yet … the state's most recent data on gasoline supplies, which are just 2.5 percent below last year's level, may not justify the 50-cents-a-gallon surge in the average pump price over the last week. In her letter to the FTC, Feinstein raised questions about whether commodity traders might have colluded to sell at exorbitant prices after refiner Tesoro Corp. was allegedly caught short on supplies and had to buy extra fuel to meet its commitments. That could have caused overall market prices to soar. Yet proving such illegal collusion isn't easy.

Brown's action on the winter blend, which usually isn't sold in California until Oct. 31, is expected to bring down prices by up to 20 cents a gallon in the next week. We can't fault him for that, but he is gambling on the weather; the winter blend is more susceptible to evaporation in high heat, so another heat wave like September's could have bad environmental consequences. Moreover, one can't ignore the possibility that suppliers did conspire to raise prices; if so, Brown is rewarding bad behavior by allowing them to sell gas that's cheaper to produce. If there's a price spike next fall and the governor is under pressure to switch blends early again, it will give more credence to the conspiracy theorists.

USFS refuses to limit logging north of Truckee

By Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee

Standing amid a scattering of stumps last week, an official from the U.S. Forest Service acknowledged the agency made

mistakes by logging too many pine trees, including majestic old-growth giants, in an effort to help another Tahoe species: the quaking aspen.

But he rejected calls from local residents that the Tahoe National Forest sharply scale back the cutting along Independence Creek north of Truckee.

“Are there places where there are some trees that I’ve seen out here – some live trees still standing and some stumps – that I would have preferred be marked for retention? Yes,” said Tom Quinn, supervisor of the Tahoe National Forest.

His comments came at a meeting on Friday in the field with local residents and environmentalists to discuss the Outback Aspen Restoration Project. The project, which aims to promote aspen groves by logging conifers that compete with them, was the subject of a Bee story in August.

It entails toppling conifers – large and small – as far as 150 feet away from aspen, leaving large swaths of the Tahoe forest looking as bare as a shorn sheep. The idea is to remove conifers that have grown thick over the past century of fire suppression, allowing aspen the chance to expand and thrive.

The extensive cutting has incensed residents and conservationists, who were out in force at Friday’s meeting.

“We are shocked at the situation, the catastrophic damage being done by our government with absolutely no care for public input,” said Mary Leavell, who grazes cattle in the national forest with her husband.

“We all ultimately want forest health,” said Lauren Ranz, who lives part-time on a former 450-acre ranch near the logging zone. “But I don’t think this is the way to get it.”

Despite his concerns about cutting too many large, old trees, Quinn defended the project.

“To hear words today like devastated, destroyed … I can’t accept those words,” Quinn said.

He said the agency’s decision to allow the cutting of old-growth trees was consistent with the goal of aspen restoration, even though it angered neighbors.

“They were probably social mistakes, more than ecological mistakes,” he said of the agency’s actions.

To try to quell criticism, Quinn announced that Forest Service officials have decided to halt logging of conifers 40 inches in diameter or greater on the remaining 190 acres of the 479-acre project. But he rejected suggestions to limit cutting to trees 30 inches in diameter or less.

“We will not sacrifice the ultimate goal of the aspen restoration for retaining trees that some perceive as old-growth,” Quinn said.

“I’m extremely disappointed,” said Fred Mitchell who lives on 80 acres near where the cutting is taking place. “There are so few trees 40 inches and above, anyway.

“They’re brushing off the public like we are a minor nuisance, like we don’t count for anything,” Mitchell added.

Mitchell is one of a group of residents who have marshaled opposition by handing out flyers, contacting lawyers, political representatives and environmentalists, even placing mock tombstones on the stumps of large trees – some more than 2 centuries old – that have been logged.

“It’s not what they told us it would be,” said Gary Risse, a part-time area resident who is among those opposed. “I can tell you without a doubt there was no mention of clear-cuts whatsoever. That would have stopped it.”

Quinn said there was no intent to mislead.

“Am I disappointed at what most of you perceive as lack of transparency on this project? Very much so,” he said. “I don’t know how that happened. I guarantee you it wasn’t to be sneaky, surreptitious, to sneak this under the radar.”

Forest Service officials said the logging is supported by abundant agency science. But Chad Hanson, director and staff ecologist for the John Muir Project, said other agency projects have succeeded with less intense cutting.

“Scientific studies … do not support the assumption that you need to clear-cut forests, especially 150 feet or more away from aspen stands, or that you need to remove old- growth trees,” he said. “That is not scientifically necessary.”

Residents fear erosion will sweep off heavily logged sites this winter, polluting streams, and that stands of quaking aspen – without the shelter of surrounding conifers – will be toppled by wind and snow.

“We don’t all have to be scientists to know that this is absolutely destructive,” said Mary Leavell, the rancher. “I am appalled.”

They said too many big trees have been cut.

“I’ve covered about 300 acres of this project looking for legacy (old-growth) trees,” Mitchell said. “From what I can gather, there has only been one legacy tree left for every four and a quarter acres, which is not a very good number.”

Quinn, standing in one heavily logged zone Friday, defended the heavy cutting, saying it would benefit aspen.

“This I do not apologize for, if anyone was looking for an apology. If we are going to get aspen on the landscape, this is the type of treatment we are going to be doing.”

But he did acknowledge the logging has been more far-reaching than he would have liked.

“To have a 479-acre project and aggressively pursue aspen restoration on all 479 acres perhaps is something we need to rethink, even though we do need more and more aspen,” Quinn said.

Darvas to exhibit remaining works of art

There will be an exhibit of paintings by Peter Darvas and public reception on Oct. 13 from 1-9pm at the Ski Run Marina Art Gallery in South Lake Tahoe.

Darvas lost his studio and home on Pioneer Trail on Sept. 18 when a fire destroyed the structure.

For more information about the exhibit, call (530) 448. 4107 or email darvasart@hotmail.com.

Shrinking apple trees don’t hurt the harvest

By Dan Charles, NPR

When Zarrina Mulloboeva got invited to go apple picking the other day, she thought it would be a taste of home. She’s an exchange student from Tajikistan, in central Asia – a country close to the ancestral homeland of apples. Her uncle has a small orchard. In fact, when Mulloboeva came to the United

States six weeks ago, she brought with her a large bottle of homemade dried apple slices.

But when Mulloboeva arrived at the orchard, she was startled to find that in America, this land of skyscrapers and super-sized portions, the apple trees are midgets. Back in Tajikistan, apples hang on trees that are big as houses, and it takes real work to get at them. Here, she didn't even need a ladder.

Actually, American apple trees used to be big, too. So what made them shrink? Very simple: Dwarfing rootstocks.

"It all began a hundred years ago," says Gennaro Fazio, a geneticist with the USDA's Plant Genetic Resources Unit in Geneva, New York. In 1913, Fazio says, a scientist named Ronald Hatton went to work at a new agricultural research center in the small town of East Malling, in England. There, he started to catalog the "rootstocks" being used by apple growers across Europe.

Apple growers have known for centuries that they can graft together the roots of one tree variety with the fruit-bearing branches of another. That way, they can create a tree that combines the best of both: strong, disease-resistant roots with branches that yield delicious apples.

Hatton was intrigued by "a group of rootstocks that will dwarf the tree and make it more productive," says Fazio. Essentially, those roots channel the tree's energy away from making wood and toward growing fruit. He published information about them and distributed several of the most promising ones to apple growers.

But it took a long time for the industry to come around to more petite trees, Fazio says. Most growers couldn't believe that small trees could be more productive than big ones. With time, though, growers realized that if they used dwarfing rootstocks and planted their trees closer together, they could

increase their harvest of apples per acre by 200 to 300 percent.

And they also discovered it’s a lot easier to pick the fruit from dwarf trees and spray them, too (if you are inclined to spray your trees).

By now, smaller trees are the rule in the United States and Europe. In many other places, though – including the central Asian homeland of apples – you’ll still need a tall ladder to get your hands on the fruit.

Drought concerns return as state remains parched

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

When Californians suffer under oppressive heat, as they have for weeks, another concern is sure to follow: drought.

Long-term weather outlooks for the Golden State do not provide much reassurance. Although the stubborn heat that gripped the state finally started to ease Thursday, there is zero rain in the forecast.

Drought conditions have worsened across California compared with one year ago and are expected to get more severe through December.

Sixty-nine percent of California is considered to be in moderate drought conditions or worse, according to the National Drought Mitigation Center. One year ago, none of the state was in that condition.

The national drought center bases its outlook largely on soil moisture measurements, but California officials look at drought a little differently, basing it on whether people's water needs are being met.

The state Department of Water Resources is a long way from declaring a drought, saying it depends much more on local conditions and regional demand. But it acknowledges the potential is there.

For instance, most of the state's major reservoirs are at below-average storage levels. California avoided drought this summer because those reservoirs were filled to the brim by a wet winter in the early months of 2011. Such was not the case from January through March of this year, and the surplus is gone.

Growers in the Merced Irrigation District received a full allotment this season because of carryover in their reservoir. However, next growing season farmers will be relying heavily on runoff from the mountain snowpack.

"If it's going to be a dry year, it's going to be a concern," said Hicham Eltal, deputy general manager of water resources for the Merced Irrigation District. "It would take more water this year than last year to weather a drought."

Another example is Folsom Lake on the American River, which stood at less than half full this week, with capacity about 81 percent of average for this time of year.

"Groundwater levels are starting to go down a little in some places, and reservoir storage levels are starting to go down," said Jeanine Jones, interstate resources manager at the DWR. "If this winter is dry, we'll feel it more."

Less surface water means more groundwater pumping, which for many has become a way of life.

“In our area most of us have wells that we can depend on,” said Gino Pedretti, Merced Irrigation District board member and El Nido farmer. “There’s a few out here that don’t have enough well water and if there’s a drought, they’ll have to grow a spring crop or just not farm it at all.”

El Niño to return

It’s too early to tell what kind of winter California will have, but indications seem ominous.

During the summer, cities up and down the valley set records for high temperatures and numbers of days above 90 degrees.

Conditions have been so dry and hot that the National Interagency Fire Center announced this week it extended an “above average” fire warning across Northern California – all the way to the edge of the Pacific Ocean.

It also warned that warm, dry winds could blow across the state from inland deserts this week, rather than from the ocean as usual.

The National Weather Service has declared a weak El Niño to be in play this winter. That means the tropical Pacific Ocean is warmer than normal, a cycle that typically alters climate patterns to produce dry conditions in Northern California and wet conditions in the south part of the state.

In a long-range forecast issued Sept. 20, the weather service said odds favor just that: dry weather through December in Northern California, which happens to be where most of the state’s water supply is stored.

The situation is not preoccupying water managers in the state, said Tim Quinn, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies. They are accustomed to uncertainty, especially this early in the season.

“I’m not hearing a lot of dread at the present time,” Quinn

said. “I never paid a lot of attention to the long-term prognosticators. They’re wrong as often as they are right.

“And no matter what they say, you want to be prepared for the worst.”

Merced Sun-Star staff writer Joshua Emerson Smith contributed to this report.

Vonn wants to compete with the guys in downhill

By Doug Harrison, CBC Sports

Billie Jean King downed Bobby Riggs in tennis’ Battle of the Sexes in 1973, golf’s Michelle Wie played Luke Donald at the 2008 Reno-Tahoe Open and the following year Danica Patrick stepped behind the wheel against men at the Indy 500.

So, how about American downhill specialist Lindsey Vonn, last season’s overall World Champion, taking on 2012 men’s World Cup champion Klaus Kroll or fellow American Bode Miller in Canada?

Last week, men’s World Cup race director Gunter Hujara and the International Ski Federation (FIS) Alpine Executive Board were discussing the skier’s proposal to compete in the men’s downhill at Lake Louise, site of the first speed events of the season.

“We have been talking about it but no decision has been taken yet, it’s a matter that the FIS Council has to examine during

its next meeting in November," women's race director Atle Skaardal told reporters in Zurich.

"It's complicated because no racer is supposed to ski on a race course a week prior to his or her own competition. If Lindsey Vonn could train and compete with the men in November, she would have a huge advantage on her rivals the following week during the women's races on the same course."

With 1,980 points, Vonn compiled the most points ever by a female skier, despite being bothered much of the season by aching knees. In April, it was determined she wouldn't require surgery and just rest, even though tests revealed some fraying of the meniscus in Vonn's left knee.

The 2010 Olympic champion also became only the fourth woman to prevail in all five disciplines of modern alpine ski racing: downhill, slalom, giant slalom, super-G and combined.

Austria's Hermann Maier holds the record for most points with 2,000, set in the 2000 World Cup.

Vonn has 53 World Cup victories including 26 downhills in her career, trailing only the 62 by Annemarie Moser-Proell of Austria, who won 36 downhills between 1970 and 1980.

Winning poet to read at LTCC

Brooklyn poet Lexa Hillyer, winner of Bona Fide Book's 2011 Melissa Lantis Gregory Poetry Prize, will read from her prize-winning collection on Nov. 2.

Each year the Meyers publishing house chooses a work of poetry

to publish in honor of Lantis.

“Acquainted with the Cold” is this year’s selection.

The Nov. 2 7pm event is part of Lake Tahoe Community Colleges’ Writers’ Series.

The free event is at the South Lake Tahoe college’s library.

Also featured will be Sacramento Poet Laureate Jeff Knorr.

Letter: Fortier’s rant proves whose side she’s on

To the community,

It seems that we have the Queen of Hearts serving as mayor. In Alice in Wonderland when the Queen was unhappy with whomever or whatever in an angry burst, she shouted, off with their heads.

In a recent rant our mayor, Claire Fortier, raved in a tantrum on how unreasonable so many of us are. Translated, she’s sore because there’s a strong opposition to the loop road. She’s gone loony over the loop road. She wants it. Thus, those in opposition are unreasonable and divisive. Bad boys and girls.

Bill Crawford

Well, at least the mayor has taken off her disguise. She’s playing her cards to support the TTD and the Park Cattle Company. And the pressure’s on her to deliver. But it appears

that she’s going to be knocked off her would-be throne.

Bill Crawford, South Lake Tahoe

PS: Hale Cole needs to be reminded that the deal between Randy Lane and the city on the hole was signed in July 2006 and that his signature is on it.

Red Ribbon Week contest worth $1,000

National Family Partnership is having a national contest for its 27th annual Red Ribbon Week, Oct. 23-31. Red Ribbon Week is the oldest and largest drug prevention campaign in the country.

Families can get involved by entering a contest to promote awareness in their neighborhoods and win a drug prevention grant for their schools.

Families can enter Red Ribbon Week’s contest to win a $1,000 grant for their school and a new iPad for their home. To participate in the contest families and students must decorate the front of their homes with this year’s message: The Best Me Is Drug Free.

Take a photo with your family and the Red Ribbon Week decoration, then upload it by Nov. 2.

Ask family and friends to vote for your entry online from Nov. 2-16. Ten people from regions across the U.S. will win. Winners will be announced in December.

Massive thinning project creates healthy Tahoe forest

By Kathryn Reed

FALLEN LEAF LAKE – Sunlight shines into campsites like never before. Piles of logs are scattered about the South Shore. Burn piles are dotting the landscape. Open space where trees once stood are visible from Camp Richardson to Fallen Leaf Lake.

All of this is the result of the multi-million dollar, multi-year, multi-acre South Shore Fuels Reduction Project the U.S. Forest Service started last month. The goal is to wrap up the work at the Fallen Leaf Lake Campground this month so campers are not impacted two seasons in a row.

But weather has been a problem. Four days last week the crews had to quit early because of the fire danger – the humidity level and temperature combined created hazardous conditions.



By the time the South Shore

Fuels Reduction Project is done, more than 10,000 acres will have been treated. Photos/Kathryn Reed

“The big problem here is people are not considerate and are not obeying closure notices,” Robert Guebard, who is overseeing the operation for the Forest Service, told *Lake Tahoe News* last week on a tour of the site.

People have taken down signs – which presents a dangerous situation for others entering an area they don’t know is off-limits.

Even though the Lahontan Water Quality Control Board issued a permit for this project in the spring, that oversight agency requested more detailed plans. Those were handed over in late May, but Lahontan didn’t furnish the go-ahead permit until September. That is why the USFS got such a late start this season.

Of the 10,100 acres that will be treated, 6,000 will be hand thinned, while 4,100 acres will be mechanically treated. Slope, access and wetlands are the main factors that necessitate hand thinning. The Twin Peaks area is an example of this.

For the rest of the month, crews will be at Fallen Leaf Lake with what looks like oversized Tonka toys. One machine fells the trees, strips off the limbs and cuts it to a specific length before piling the logs for the next machine. The next apparatus lifts the logs into an open bed truck of sorts that has a massive “arm” to lift the wood into piles at the landing site.

The Sierra Nevada Framework, a document from more than 10 years ago, prevents trees with a diameter of 30 or more inches from being felled. The U.S. Forest Service team is not always

appreciative of what can seem like an arbitrary rule. A half dead fir must be left behind near the road that leads from the campground to Fallen Leaf Lake. It’s too big to fell even though it’s not healthy.

Fallen Leaf also has archaeological sites and historic sites, like old flumes, where thinning is prohibited.

CTL Forest Management out of Placerville is doing the work. It will be up to CTL where the wood goes – whether for commercial use, biomass or firewood.

“These guys are at the whim of the market. Right now the biomass market has tanked. That’s why you see big burn piles,” Guebard explained.

While it looks like a significant logging operation is taking place in the Lake Tahoe Basin, the reality is it’s a massive thinning process.

The goal is in 10 years the South Shore will be a healthy forest when it comes to how dense it is, the ladder fuels that are gone, the tree canopy, the size and variety of trees left. Fire used to take care of all of this naturally. But with people living in the woods, fire suppression is the norm. That means forests need help to be healthy.

The goal is to have treated 1,100 before snow brings the operation to a standstill this fall. Camp Rich is done for the year. The Railroad Grade trail by Powerline is being worked on now.

Next year the Sierra Tract-Golden Bear area, and South Upper Truckee by Hawley Grade will be treated.

Maintenance will be ongoing so the forest doesn’t end up like it is today – overgrown and prone to a severe wildfire. It’s possible prescribed ground fires will be used down the road to keep the forest healthy.

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder (Click on photos to enlarge.)