South Shore women ready to rally to be heard

By Kathryn Reed

"We walk in peaceful resistance to the negative rhetoric of the past election cycle."

That is the message a group of South Shore women want to convey as they march Jan. 21 in solidarity with the thousands, if not millions, of other women throughout the United States on that day.

A woman in Hawaii initiated the Washington march after the Nov. 8 election. From there, people in communities in nearly every state have been organizing marches to take place on that Saturday. The impetus is to give a voice to women's issues that many believe have been trampled upon by President elect-Donald Trump.

The marches will occur the day after he becomes president and takes up residence in the White House.

Locally, it was Del Laine, Brooke Laine and Vicki Gonzales who spearheaded the event. Now about 20 people are behind the Tahoe brigade. Soroptimist International of South Lake Tahoe is the financial backer.

"This is not a demonstration just for women. It is for unity; it is for tolerance. It's also recognizing we are paying attention and we are going to stay educated locally and act nationally when necessary," Brooke Laine told *Lake Tahoe News.*

The local march could be the only bi-state event in the United States. Organizers plan to convene in the parking lot at Hard Rock in Stateline, walk along Highway 50 to Lakeview Commons and gather there as a group.

Two women of different generations are expected give short speeches. The proclamation the group came up with will likely be read as well.

The procession will start at 11am no matter the weather. Sponsors are expecting between 200 and 500 people – and not just women. Other organizations have expressed a desire to be part of this march, which to date is the only one planned in the basin.

Laine and others hope that out of this gathering people will unite to form a sustaining group that will have its own identity rooted in the bigger cause, with action taken locally.

A **Facebook page** has been created to provide more information about the Tahoe march.

Sierra roads horrid, nasty weather not stopping

By Lake Tahoe News

Don’t drive. That is the message being delivered by nearly every agency dealing with roads in and around Lake Tahoe.

This was the South Lake Tahoe’s message on Jan. 4, “Stay home. If you really don’t have to go out, don’t. Even if you can drive well in the snow, not everyone else can. Don’t tempt fate: If you don’t have somewhere you have to be, watch the snow from indoors.”

Caltrans has no estimate when Interstate 80 will open. It’s been closed since Wednesday afternoon. Traffic was preventing

snow removal teams from being able to clear the road.

Motorists using cable (ladder) chains may be turned around on Highway 267 at the Northstar and Kings Beach chain control checkpoints. Although cable chains are legal traction devices, they've proven to be ineffective when attempting to drive over Brockway Summit during heavy snow storms, according to Caltrans.

All the summits have been having issues because of the wet snow. Not all drivers are prepared or know how to drive in the conditions.

With Kingsbury Grade closed for what could be weeks because of a sink hole, drivers have to go over Luther Pass or Spooner Summit.

It took Amanda Adams 1½ hours to get from Gardnerville to the Y on Wednesday night.

"There are multiple cars stopped on the pass, some are putting on chains in the road, others are parked without anyone inside the vehicle (maybe they are doing some back country skiing). The road condition isn't horrible, just packed snow with a few areas of deep ruts. But they should have chain control check point in Hope Valley. There were a couple 2WD cars without chains or spinning out trying to go up the road," she posted on *Lake Tahoe News'* Facebook page.

While it was mostly rain in South Lake Tahoe at lake level on Jan. 4, it had been snowing in Incline and there are reports of multiple feet of snow at the top of Kingsbury Grade.

Both state transportation agencies expect the delays to continue as the snow keeps falling.

The National Weather Service in Reno is predicting up to 2 feet of snow for summit passes and continued snowfall for the mountains and at lake level on Thursday. Whiteout conditions

may occur.

An atmospheric river is headed toward Tahoe. Flooding is possible in the basin, with Douglas County already issuing a flood alert. The next major storm will arrive Saturday, with the brunt coming Sunday and Monday.

The Weather Service warns, “A flood watch has been issued for the Sierra and western Nevada this weekend. Rising snow levels and the potential to receive 6-12 inches of rain in the Sierra will create serious flooding concerns. If you have interests near creeks, streams, rivers or flood prone areas now is the time to prepare.”

Most of the ski resorts are rejoicing about the snow, though some have had rain and avalanche danger is a huge concern.

“This storm has been incredible. Five feet of snow has piled up over the past couple of days, and it’s continuing to fall fast this afternoon,” said Mike Pierce, director of marketing at Mt. Rose Ski Tahoe, said in a statement. “This system and those forecast to come behind it are setting us up for an incredible winter season, and one of the snowiest Januarys in years.”

Fiscal oversight not top priority for EDC supes

By Kathryn Reed

It has been well documented that to get a job in El Dorado County it pays to know who is doing the hiring.

Last month the Board of Supervisors reviewed a list of

contracts of $64,000 or less signed by the chief administrative officer. According to board policy, these contracts are not approved by the supervisors, but instead they are reviewed by the board annually after the fact. The majority of the contracts were signed by former CAO Larry Combs.

Joe Harn, county-auditor controller, has been harping on transparency for years. Only now with Don Ashton at the helm of the county is there beginning to be some light shed on favors done by previous CAOs.

Nonetheless, the electeds seem to care very little about what has gone on under their watch. Supervisor Brian Veerkamp appeared disgusted with Harn bringing the issue up again in December.

“I’m really here to briefly vent about the Prentice, Long, and Epperson contract which really is a text book example of a total lack of transparency and frankly poor financial management. This contact is in the CAO’s budget but the contract administrator is county counsel. So, who’s ultimately responsible for the work and the contract? I don’t know. As far as I can tell, nobody,” Harn told the supervisors. “Also, related to Prentice, we are talking about Alpine County’s county counsel who the former CAO brought on board, which indicates, I suppose our former CAO concluded that there’s not a law firm in our county that could provide these services, which I find hard to believe. What this is really about county officials hiring their out-of-county friends.”

Not only are friends being hired, but they come on board at top dollar.

When former CAO Pamela Knorr had the same position in Alpine County she filed a claim for damages against that county for failing to provide a safe work environment. Knorr’s claim

states that her alleged grievances are supported by Ken Machold's investigative report. Machold is now an employee of the Prentice law firm. David Prentice of the Prentice, Long, and Epperson is the part time county counsel for Alpine County and Prentice approved a $168,000 settlement/severance agreement between Knorr and Alpine County.

Mike Ciccozzi, who heads El Dorado County's legal department, is the contract administrator for the county's current contract with the Prentice law firm.

Former EDC CAO Terri Daly, a former Amador County employee, brought in her friend Martha Shaver, the former Amador County counsel as a consultant. Daly signed a contract with Shaver to review and update EDC's policies and ordinances. EDC paid Shaver $50,000. No proposed update of the county's policies and ordinances ever came forward. In fact, the Board of Supervisors has nothing to show for this $50,000 expenditure.

Beyond being fiscally irresponsible, these types of hires and contracts are impacting morale at the county.

Harn told the supervisors that county employees find it demoralizing when CAOs hire their out of county friends at the highest step.

Board policy says all employees hired by the CAO at the highest step must be reported to the board and the public annually. On April 13, 2016, Harn wrote the BOS and then CAO Combs saying the public reporting requirement was being ignored.

Combs, the former Sutter County CAO, hired two former Sutter County employees at step 5, the highest level. Those hires (the risk manager and assistant CAO) were never reported publicly as required by county policy. Both were friends of Combs'. Shawne Corley, the current assistant CAO, was hired at an initial salary of $182,000 per year. Qualified longtime El Dorado County employees were never given a chance by the then

CAO, according to Harn.

At the time, Harn told *Lake Tahoe News*, “The supervisors all say that they are for complete transparency, but the county doesn’t comply with its own policies that require transparency.”

Snowy forecast balances sketchy water content



Frank Gehrke trudges through knee-deep snow Jan. 3 near Sierra-at-Tahoe to measure the water content. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

PHILLIPS STATION – While the water content of the Sierra snowpack is below average for this time of year, the October rains have reservoirs in California higher than most Januarys, especially considering the state is coming out of five years of drought.

No one is saying the drought is over, but the current situation and short-term weather forecast have officials cautiously optimistic.

At the Jan. 3 snow survey on Highway 50 in the field near the entrance to Sierra-at-Tahoe the water content was 6 inches, which is 53 percent of average. Statewide, the average is 70 percent. This location is one of the lower ones in terms of elevation. As anyone who lives in the Lake Tahoe area knows, the snow line until now has been much higher.

It doesn't matter if the snow comes all at once or trickles in. The important thing is that the spigot stays on.

"We don't get piddly storms, we get big dumps," Frank Gehrke, who does the snow survey for the state Department of Water Resources, said. "January, February, March – any one of those can produce record precipitation."

For part of December this swath of land was more dirt than snow; proving things can change quickly.

The importance of the snowpack is that it provides water for people and farms downstream mostly in the form of runoff in the spring that is kept in various reservoirs throughout the state.

Lake Shasta, California's largest surface reservoir, is at 118 percent of its historical average for January. This is a dramatic improvement from 2016 when it was at 50 percent of its average. Lake Oroville, the State Water Project's largest

reservoir, is at 91 percent of its historical average, while a year ago it was at 47 percent.

The series of storms lined up to descend upon Tahoe will keep adding to what was measured on Tuesday. However, it’s not the snow depth that matters, but the water content. What has been falling the last few days is super light, making for incredible powder days, but it does not pack as much water content.

Sink hole closes Kingsbury Grade indefinitely

Kingsbury Grade has finally been closed because the sink hole that has been expanding is now too dangerous for vehicles to drive on. The closure went into effect at 5pm Jan. 3.

“As weather will play a factor, no timeframe is set to complete roadway repairs, but we will work to reopen the road as quickly and efficiently as possible,” Meg Ragonese with the Nevada Department of Transportation said in a statement. However, it is expected to take several weeks to repair.



A sign for the past two weeks warned motorists of the weakened surface on Kingsbury Grade. Photo/Lisa Huard

Lake Tahoe News first reported on the deteriorating road condition last week.

An eroding drainage pipe under the highway has created problem. It is on the Carson City side of the road.

Kingsbury Grade is the main thoroughfare between the Lake Tahoe Basin and Carson Valley, with 5,600 cars on average traveling on this road. Drivers may still use the Tahoe side between Highway 50 and Tramway.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Danger lurks on the flanks of Highway 50

By Tony Bizjak, Sacramento Bee

More drivers than ever this winter are parking illegally on the side of Highway 50 to play or take photos in the snow.

That’s despite the fact that “No Stopping Anytime” signs frequently line the road from Placerville to Echo Summit. California Highway Patrol officials say some people are even parking on one side of the road and running across to the other, snow toys in hand.

“It’s like people haven’t seen snow before,” CHP spokesman Brent McElmurry in Placerville said.

Read the whole story

Lawsuit filed to stop Placer’s Tahoe area plan

By Kathryn Reed

A lawsuit has been filed to stop the implementation of Placer County’s Tahoe Basin Area Plan.

The approvals by the Board of Supervisors on Dec. 6 included the plan, environmental documents and green-lighted the 118-unit Tahoe City Lodge project.

The lawsuit filed Dec. 21 by the California Clean Energy Committee against the county names Kila Tahoe LLC, the developer of the hotel, as a party of interest. The group is supported by 45 North Shore residents in its quest to get the court to side with its beliefs.

CCEC contends the environmental analysis is not adequate, in particular CEQA – the California Environmental Quality Act.

Court documents state, “The county failed to describe and failed to focus on feasible mitigation for climate impacts of the area plan and in doing so failed to comply with the information disclosure provisions of CEQA. … Then the county simply concluded that the extent of the emission reduction was unknown and that the impact was therefore significant and could not be mitigated. That process does not meet the requirement of CEQA that mitigation measures be discussed.”

The lawsuit brings up the fact the county said it would reduce vehicle miles traveled by building bike trails. However, CCEC points out that in Placer’s capital improvement plan road improvements take priority and that the bike paths are underfunded. This fact, the plaintiffs contend, has the county saying one thing and doing another.

CCEC has been part of the process for months, having submitted comments on the draft and final environmental impact reports.

“If the respondent agencies are allowed to proceed with the project, irreparable harm will result to the environment and the public,” the lawsuit says.

Because of the holidays no representatives from either side could be reached.

The nonprofit California Clean Energy Committee is based in Davis. The group advocates on behalf of the public for energy conservation, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, sustainable transportation, smart growth and other conservation issues. CCED also filed a lawsuit last fall to stop the Martis Valley West project from going forward based on insufficient environmental review. That case is still in the courts.

Spread by trade and climate, bugs butcher U.S. forests

By Michael Casey and Patrick Whittle, AP

In a towering forest of centuries-old eastern hemlocks, it's easy to miss one of the tree's nemeses. No larger than a speck of pepper, the Hemlock woolly adelgid spends its life on the underside of needles sucking sap, eventually killing the tree.

The bug is one in an expanding army of insects draining the life out of forests from New England to the West Coast. Aided by global trade, a warming climate and drought-weakened trees, the invaders have become one of the greatest threats to biodiversity in the United States.

Scientists say they already are driving some tree species toward extinction and are causing billions of dollars a year in damage — and the situation is expected to worsen.

"They are one of the few things that can actually eliminate a forest tree species in pretty short order — within years," said Harvard University ecologist David Orwig as he walked past dead hemlocks scattered across the university's 5.8-square-mile research forest in Petersham.

This scourge is projected to put 63 percent of the country's forest at risk through 2027 and carries a cost of several billion dollars annually in dead tree removal, declining property values and timber industry losses, according to a peer-reviewed study this year in Ecological Applications.

That examination, by more than a dozen experts, found that hundreds of pests have invaded the nation's forests, and that

the emerald ash borer alone has the potential to cause $12.7 billion in damage by 2020.

Insect pests, some native and others from as far away as Asia, can undermine forest ecosystems. For example, scientists say, several species of hemlock and almost 20 species of ash could nearly go extinct in the coming decades. Such destruction would do away with a critical sponge to capture greenhouse gas emissions, shelter for birds and insects and food sources for bears and other animals. Dead forests also can increase the danger of catastrophic wildfires.

Today’s connected world enables foreign invaders to cross oceans in packing materials or on garden plants, and then reach American forests. Once here, they have rapidly expanded their ranges.

While all 50 states have been attacked by pests, experts say forests in the Northeast, California, Colorado and parts of the Midwest, North Carolina and Florida are especially at risk. Forests in some states, like New York, are close to major trade routes, while others, like in Florida, house trees especially susceptible to pests. Others, like New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Maine, are experiencing record warming.

“The primary driver of the invasive pest problem is globalization, which includes increased trade and travel,” Andrew Liebhold, a Forest Service research entomologist in West Virginia. “But there are cases where climate change can play an important role. As climates warm, species are able to survive and thrive in more northerly areas.”

The emerald ash borer, first found in 2002 in Michigan, is now in 30 states and has killed hundreds of millions of ash trees. The gypsy moth, discovered in 1869 in Boston, is now found in 20 states and has reached the northern Great Lakes, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Native bark beetles have taken advantage of warming conditions

and a long western drought to rapidly range from Mexico into Canada. An outbreak in Colorado spread across 3.4 million acres of forest from 1996 to 2013, according to the Forest Service, and in California 100 million-plus trees have died in the Sierra Nevada since 2010.

Though small, bugs can easily overwhelm big trees with sheer numbers.

“They drain the resin that otherwise defends the tree,” said Matt Ayres, a Dartmouth College ecologist who worked on the Ecological Applications study. “Then, the tree is toast.”

Forest pests in the era of climate change are especially concerning for timberland owners, said Jasen Stock, executive director of the New Hampshire Timberland Owners Association.

“We’re dealing with pests we’ve never been around before, never had to manage around before,” Stock said. “It’s something we’re going to be dealing with forever.”

Urban forests, too, are at risk from outbreaks. In Worcester, Massachusetts, a city of about 180,000, an Asian longhorned beetle infestation in 2008 resulted in the removal of 31,000 trees.

“You would leave for work with a tree-lined street, and you come back and there was not a tree in sight,” recalled Ruth Seward, executive director of the nonprofit Worcester Tree Initiative. Most trees have since been replaced.

Though trees can die off quickly, the impact of pests on a forest ecosystem can take decades to play out. Dead hemlocks, for example, are giving way to black birch and other hardwoods. Gone are favorite nesting spots for two types of warblers, as well as the bark that red squirrels love to eat, Harvard’s Orwig said. The birds won’t die off, he said, but their ranges will be restricted.

“It’s a great example of how one species can make a difference in the forest,” Orwig said.

As pests proliferate, scientists seek to contain them.

Among the methods are bio controls, in which bugs that feed upon pests in their native lands are introduced here. Of the 30 states with emerald ash borer outbreaks, the USDA says 24 have released wasp species to combat them. Some scientists worry about introducing another pest; others complain they aren’t effective because they can’t eat enough of the fast-breeding pests to make a difference.

“With all bio controls, the hope is to create balance — balance between predator and prey,” said Ken Gooch, forest health program director for the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation.

Genetic modifications also offer promise.

On a research farm in Syracuse, New York, are rows of 10-foot chestnut trees tweaked with a wheat gene to make them resistant to chestnut blight, a fungus that came from Japan more than a century ago and killed millions of trees. Genetic engineering could likewise be applied to fight insects, said William Powell, a State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry professor directing the chestnut research.

An alternative strategy, also a slow one, is to plant trees 50 or 100 miles away from their normal range so they can escape pests, or adapt to a more favorable climate, said Steven Strauss, a professor of forest biotechnology at Oregon State University.

“Mother Nature knows best,” he said. “It’s assisted migration.”

To stop the next pest from entering the country, researchers

like Gary M. Lovett, of the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies in New York, propose measures such as switching from solid wood shipping material that can harbor insects and restricting shrub and tree imports.

Nonetheless, Lovett said new pests are inevitable. “We have this burgeoning global trade,” he said, “so we will get a lot more of these.”

Calif. plan makes water conservation ‘a way of life’

By Darryl Fears, Washington Post

Here in the land of beauty and make-believe, it’s important to keep up appearances. Tracy Quinn sees it whenever she walks her dog: sprinklers irrigating pretty green lawns and wasted water bleeding across sidewalks during the state’s driest spell in centuries.

“It drives me crazy,” said Quinn, a water policy analyst for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

But now California is preparing for a dramatic change in how its residents use water. A water management plan that could be finalized in January is designed to make conservation “a way of life.”

The new plan would instead give each water agency a budget for how much water its customers are allowed to use. Each agency’s allowance would be based on estimates from state officials of its demographics – population, economy, outdoor temperature, tree canopy and even the rate of water evaporation – to

determine its need.

Read the whole story

Avalanche group's first Tahoe-area director speaks out

By Benjamin Spillman, Reno Gazette-Journal

You might not know anything about Richard Bothwell.

But Bothwell knows things about you.

He knows that as a human you're prone to making bad decisions.

And if you like to play in the Sierra Nevada snow he knows how those bad decisions could get you killed in an avalanche.

"People who die in avalanches are not dumb people … they just made bad decisions," said Bothwell. "And usually they made bad decisions in the face of evidence telling them they were bad decisions."

Read the whole story