Drought’s lessons for food security

By Ken Sofer, Slate

Despite the arrival of increased rain and snow from El Niño this winter, California enters the fifth straight year of its worst drought in 1,200 years. The drought has been especially acute in the state’s Central Valley, which ranges from extreme to exceptional drought.

With its fertile soil, moderate climate, and unparalleled irrigation system, the Central Valley is one of the most productive agricultural regions on the planet, producing nearly all of America’s almonds, olives, walnuts, and pistachios; the vast majority of its grapes, strawberries, avocados, carrots, tomatoes, and lettuce; and $13.1 billion worth of milk and cattle. As a result of the drought, California’s 39 million residents are competing for fewer available water resources. Water prices have spiked,increasing tenfold in some areas.

The drought and the subsequent increased cost of water have led to declines in agricultural production across the state.

Read the whole story

Mount Rushmore – more than 4

stone faces

Publisher's note: ***This is one in a series of stories about the National Park Service, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2016. All articles may be found via the Home Page, select Special Projects, then National Park Service 100th.***



Mount Rushmore illuminates the night sky of South Dakota. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

MOUNT RUSHMORE NATIONAL MEMORIAL, S.D. – I've never lived in South Dakota, but it's still my home. And nothing will ever change that fact.

My parents were high school sweethearts living in Rapid City. My three sisters were born there. Even though no one on my mom's side still resides in the state, this hasn't stopped us from having regular family reunions in the Black Hills.

Those hills are also home to an incredibly famous rock – Mount Rushmore.

I don't know how many times I've seen The Faces – that's what locals call Rushmore. (My lineage makes me a local, at least in my heart.) I don't recall a time of ever not seeing The Faces when I've been in the state. It's almost like a calling; I have to go there.

A friend asked me "why?" before I went back there earlier this month. I didn't have an answer. Now I do. It's about family, it's about patriotism, it's about tradition.

So many memorials are erected out of tragedy, or are about war and death.

Mount Rushmore is about celebrating the accomplishment of four iconic presidents – George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Teddy Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln. It's a message of inspiration, fortitude and solidarity. It's about being proud of their life's work and what it meant for the greater good of the United States.

It's also about a sculptor – Gutzon Borglum – creating a masterpiece one chisel at a time, one precisely placed stick of dynamite at a time. (Ninety percent of the rock was removed with dynamite.) Borglum died before his creation was completed. His son, Lincoln, finished the work. This marks the 75th anniversary of Mount Rushmore National Memorial's completion.

It has grown into a destination for travelers throughout the world; with more than 3 million visitors a year.



A path allows visitors to see The Faces at different angles. Photo/Kathryn Reed

One of my favorite memories is 10 years ago when the reunion was over Fourth of July. To see the fireworks light up The Faces, well, it was emotional. It sent chills through my body.

Our family tradition is to go in the early evening to see the transition from day to night. The lighting ceremony keeps evolving, but the awe of the event never fades. The spotlight on those four faces is breathtaking, just as it is to walk in through the Avenue of Flags and have them make a frame of sorts around The Faces.

Calmness washes over me when I see Mount Rushmore. I’m home, I’m with family and the future seems bright when looking at our past.

Daily fantasy sports operation returning to Nev.

By Sally Ho, AP

Nevada gambling regulators have approved a new platform that will allow bets in a fantasy sports model.

The Nevada Gaming Commission voted Thursday to give a gambling license to Henderson-based US Fantasy.

The newly developed sports system essentially blends sports betting with elements of traditional fantasy sports contests.

US Fantasy and traditional fantasy systems, such as the popular DraftKings and FanDuel models, differ primarily in the way they pay out winners.

US Fantasy's payout depends on what and how other gamblers are betting, while traditional fantasy sports sets an established prize money amount.

The new Nevada platform also declares fantasy sports betting as gambling, despite the industry arguing in the face of legal challenges across the country that its games are not gambling.

The move comes as the daily fantasy sports industry argues in the face of legal challenges across the country that its games are not gambling.

US Fantasy Owner Vic Salerno said his model could easily be reframed to fit states that have approved guidelines allowing fantasy sports to operate. But an industry leader predicts it won't have a major effect on fantasy sports overall because it may only work in Nevada, where sports betting is already legal.

In the US Fantasy system, users bet against each other on

individual player stats, with a pot of prize money that can change depending on how many people are betting and how much they bet. Using football as an example, a user can wager that Tom Brady will throw the most yards that week.

In traditional fantasy sports, users generally pick a group of players to create a team, and if they win, they know they are getting an established payout. In the football example, Tom Brady's performance would help rack up points along with the rest of the players of the imaginary team.

The popular DraftKings and FanDuel platforms ceased operations in states such as Illinois, New York and Nevada, where they were accused of operating as illegal, unregulated betting systems.

The industry has lobbied states to approve laws that would allow them to operate without legal ambiguity. So far, Virginia, Indiana, Tennessee, Missouri, Mississippi and Colorado legislators have done so, while New York's governor has yet to sign off on the state's version.

In Nevada, regulators have urged fantasy sports sites to apply for gambling licenses, a move the industry opposes as too costly and time consuming.

Dead Sierra trees a combustible quaqmire

By Scott Smith, AP

California's drought and a bark beetle epidemic have caused the largest die-off of Sierra Nevada forests in modern

history, raising fears that trees could come crashing down on people or fuel deadly wildfires that could wipe out mountain communities.

Officials who are cutting down and stacking the most dangerous trees in piles across six counties, however, say they are stumped by how to get rid of them all.

One solution is to fire up a fleet of 10 large, mechanized incinerators the state recently purchased. Promoters say they burn so hot that they spew little if any smoke, making them environmentally friendly.

Environmentalists contend the burners undercut an emergency order by Gov. Jerry Brown – considered a global leader in the fight against climate change – who called for sending the trees to biomass plants and converting them into energy.

Chief Ken Pimlott, who manages the state's response to the die-off as director of CalFire, defended the air burners as one of many tools.

He acknowledged the burners will contribute to air pollution, as with any work in the forest, but much less than a large wildfire, which the air burners may prevent by removing dead trees.

"We could have a catastrophic wildfire in any of these communities," he said, adding that sending trees to electricity-generating plants remains a priority. "We have to be aggressive in terms of protecting life and property."

Called air-curtain burners, the 20-foot long, steel containers blast a sheet of air over the open top, disposing of up to eight trees an hour. The state bought them for roughly $1 million, part of a $5 million investment in equipment to meet the epidemic.

A lack of visible smoke, however, doesn't mean the air burners

are clean, said Chad Hanson, a forest ecologist at Earth Island Institute's John Muir Project. He called them a waste of taxpayer money and a misguided approach to managing California's forests.

"You're still pumping a lot of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere," Hanson said.

Living trees absorb and store carbon dioxide, a major source of greenhouse gases, which is released again when the wood is burned. Hanson said he favors leaving the trees that need to be cut down on the forest floor to naturally decompose as wildlife habitat.

He urged Brown to withdraw the emergency declaration, fearing that it would increase logging of dead trees that forests need to replenish. Hanson added that dead trees don't fuel more fierce wildfires as commonly believed.

Last year alone 29 million trees died at the height of California's drought now in its fifth year, the U.S. Forest Service reports. Drought makes trees vulnerable to the insects' attack, officials say.

A beetle epidemic in forests of the Rocky Mountain states was blamed in 2013 for contributing to Colorado's second largest wildfire, forcing entire communities to be evacuated, said Jeff Mai, aerial survey manager for the U.S. Forest Service based in Colorado.

Officials removed some trees throughout the region that threatened people, selling them as lumber products like fence posts. Most were left to decompose naturally. Mai said that in California, bark beetles have killed five times more area of forests than in Colorado.

It's unclear how many trees in the Sierra will be cut down. Officials say the first job is removing those that threaten motorists and mountain communities.

Declaring the emergency on Oct. 30, Brown formed a task force, including representatives of the energy industry and environmentalists, that is charged with carrying out the order, which emphasizes sending the trees to biomass plants that turn agriculture and tree waste into electricity.

That has moved slowly because California's few remaining biomass plants are closing as utility companies turn to cheaper sources of solar and wind.

Another solution to turn the dead trees to lumber has hit obstacles because they quickly deteriorate, and beetles carry a fungus that stains the wood blue, diminishing its value.

Urgency for residents at the heart of the tree epidemic remains high as California enters another potentially explosive wildfire season.

"One big fire in the wrong place will become very big, very fast," said Randy Hanvelt, a Tuolumne County supervisor. "I'm afraid people are going to die."

CalFire plans to start running the air burners around the clock this fall.

An environmental benefit of the air burners is that they eliminate the soot, a major contributor to climate change, said Norbert Fuhrmann, vice president of Air Burners, Inc., the device's Florida-based manufacturer.

Jim McDougald, a CalFire division chief in Fresno County overseeing the burners, said he prefers turning the trees into energy, lumber or opening undiscovered markets to give them value.

But the air burners are one means for the state to get rid of trees in the massive die-off that's changing the Sierra's landscape for years to come, he said.

"This is bad," said McDougald, standing at a lookout point

south of Yosemite, where a few patches of dead trees two years now dominate the vista. “It’ll never come back – not in our lifetime.”

Heavenly makes epic changes for summer

By Kathryn Reed

Heavenly Mountain Resort is becoming a year-round economic driver.

With the opening of Epic Discovery this month, the South Shore resort is redefining itself – at least when it comes to summer activities.

For years the Broomfield-Colo.-based firm wanted to diversify, but U.S. Forest Service regulations prevented that from happening. The feds own much of the land where the ski resorts operate. Congress, though, in 2011 changed the rules, thus allowing resort operators to alter their business model.

Vail Resorts launched the multi-million dollar on-mountain expansion at Heavenly and Vail this year, with Breckenridge to be added in 2017. Resort officials did not release the exact cost of the improvements.

(At this time there are no plans to transform Northstar or Kirkwood. Northstar is still working on its master plan.)

“These kinds of options are highly likely to result in visitors planning extra days in our community because there’s more for them to do now. This of course translates to an improved economy, which means more job stability for people

who work in tourism whether they work in lodging, restaurants, retail or other businesses who are impacted by the success of tourism," B Gorman, CEO of Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce, told *Lake Tahoe News.*

It takes manpower to operate the various recreation activities. Heavenly will be putting 200 people to work this summer. Those are full-time jobs. Many of those employees work for the resort in the winter, so now they have year-round employment.

Epic Discovery features 12 activities including an alpine coaster, ziplines, ropes courses, canopy tours, rock climbing, tubing, 4 x 4 expedition tours, wildlife trail exploration and interactive learning stations.

"It's got so many levels of impact on the destination, benefitting everyone from resident to visitor to our overall competitive differentiation," Carol Chaplin, executive director of Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, told *Lake Tahoe News.*

The benefits Chaplin sees include:

· New year-round jobs.

· Mountain access for the summer visitor.

· Access for the visitor who may not otherwise have an opportunity or inclination to venture out.

· Experiential activities that provide education and foster stewardship.

· Recreational opportunities that appeal to a broad age range.

· The contribution by the Nature Conservancy.

· The potential to increase the average length of stay

of visitors, providing additional economic impact.

Snow forced construction to be slow and delayed this spring. Plus, with it all being new, it took longer to get things in place for this inaugural season. Footings for some of the apparatus needed to be installed. That's a one-time issue. For the pieces that will be taken down in winter it should be easier to erect them next summer now that people have installed them at least once.

"I think it is important to recognize that these new activities on the mountain provide approachable access to the outdoors for visitors who might otherwise be intimidated to venture out into the wilderness," Gorman said.

While Heavenly has been adding more to its summer offerings for the last few years, this is a more complete experience. The main thing missing from what's on the drawing board is the bike park. That is still a couple years off.

"We want to optimize what we have now," Pete Sonntag, COO of Heavenly, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "There is so much new that we don't want to take on too much."

More hiking trails will also be added in the future.

Nev. seeks 'answers, not excuses' for painkiller

epidemic

By Jason Hidalgo, Reno Gazette-Journal

Calling it one of the deadliest epidemics affecting Nevada and the United States, Gov. Brian Sandoval said everything is on the table for addressing the state's prescription painkiller problem.

"At least one person in Nevada dies every day from an opioid overdose," Sandoval said. "We can and we must do better."

An ongoing issue in Nevada for years, prescription opioid abuse gained additional attention in April after law enforcement raided a Reno car dealership. The raid was part of an investigation into an alleged oxycodone drug ring following the death of former Nevada football player Michael Yenick. The investigation also led to the arrest of Dr. Robert Rand of Rand Family Care in Reno.

Read the whole story

GOP puts more boots on the ground in Nev.

By Ben Botkin, Las Vegas Review-Journal

Republicans are taking the lessons they learned from the past three presidential elections and putting them to use in Nevada and elsewhere in 2016.

It's led to an added emphasis on a boots-on-the-ground approach in the Silver State and much less reliance on phone

banks to reach and recruit potential voters.

National and state Republican leaders reached this point by starting early with planning and taking a look at what worked – and didn't work – in the past three presidential elections. Republicans won just one of those – in 2004 when President George W. Bush was re-elected. President Barack Obama won the next two in 2008 and 2012.

Read the whole story

Meyers hockey academy on solid ice

TRPA board approves facility

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Hockey before education. That is ultimately what made the difference for the Tahoe Hockey Academy in Meyers to move forward.

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board on June 22 voted unanimously to allow a 16.4-acre parcel at the bottom of Old Meyers Grade to be transformed into an elite hockey academy for athletes seeking to play at a Division 1 university or beyond.

"We are going to help a lot of kids achieve their goals. That is the most important thing," Jami James, founder and vice

president of Tahoe Hockey Academy, told *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting.

As a kid James came to Tahoe to go to different camps. He said he played hockey and baseball at the professional level. The Berkeley native said he loves Tahoe and wants to give back, to help youngsters, to essentially repay the people who helped him when he was an at-risk kid.

While education is a large component of what will go on at the academy, hockey is the reason youth ages 13 to 20 will attend. All classes will be online. No instructors will be at the facility.

Opponents argued this is a school, while proponents said the California Department of Education does not define this type of facility as being a school. The parcel is zoned for a group facility. If this were deemed to primarily be a school, it would not be an allowed use per zoning regulations.

At build-out, which is probably going to take a few years, eight adults will be employed, with 92 players attending. Dorms will be built, with construction expected to start this summer. James told *LTN* the school will start this fall, but players are likely to be housed elsewhere until construction is finished.

The academy will follow the academic year, with summer being reserved for camps – including this summer.

The project generated controversy when last month it was on the bi-state regulatory agency's consent agenda. Letters and phone calls prompted staff to table the item for one month and bring it out into the open with a public hearing. It was originally on the consent agenda because two previous projects – in 1995 and 2011 – had been approved, and the academy is an allowed use.

Land use, parking, traffic, coverage, noise and lighting were

the major issues raised.

The 10 people who spoke on Wednesday were almost split between supporters and opponents.

The uproar generated change, including moving the tennis court away from the nearest neighbor. It will be frozen in the winter to have training onsite. Resident Rick Van Horn is worried any chemicals used in the coils for freezing purposes could leak. He asked for the soil and groundwater to be tested.

No outside lights will be used to enable play or training after dark.

No student is expected to have a vehicle. Vans will transport the players to the ice rink in South Lake Tahoe.

Earmarked by the academy is $150,000 in upgrades for that facility.

All of the board members who spoke were complimentary of the academy, saying this is good for the region, will benefit the economy and that one day the South Shore may be home to Olympic hockey players just as it is for skiers and snowboarders.

Feds: Drought kills 66 million trees in Sierra

By Scott Smith, AP

The number of trees in California’s Sierra Nevada forests killed by drought, a bark beetle epidemic and warmer

temperatures has dramatically increased since last year, raising fears they will fuel catastrophic wildfires and endanger people's lives, officials said Wednesday.

Since 2010, an estimated 66 million trees have died in a six-county region of the central and southern Sierra hardest hit by the epidemic, the U.S. Forest Service said.

Officials flying over the region captured images of dead patches that have turned a rust-colored red. The mortality from Tuolumne to Kern counties has increased by 65 percent since the last count announced in October, which found 40 million dead trees.

California is in the fifth year of a historic drought, which officials say has deprived trees of water, making them more vulnerable to attack from beetles.

Gov. Jerry Brown in October declared an emergency, forming a task force charged with finding ways to remove the trees that threaten motorists and mountain communities.

These efforts have hit obstacles, slowing the tree removal as California enters a potentially explosive wildfire season.

Brown pushed for burning the trees at biomass plants to generate electricity, sending them to lumber mills or burning them in large incinerators, removing potential fuel for wildfires.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, who oversees the Forest Service, said disaster awaits if more money isn't invested in managing forests in California and across the country. He urged Congress to act.

"Tree die-offs of this magnitude are unprecedented and increase the risk of catastrophic wildfires that puts property and lives at risk," he said in a statement. "We must fund wildfire suppression like other natural disasters in the

country.”

The Forest Service has committed $32 million to California’s epidemic, and the state budgeted $11 million for CalFire to buy tree removal equipment and to grant local communities money for their own work.

So far, the Forest Service says it has cut down 77,000 trees that pose the greatest risk to people, along roads and near communities and campgrounds. Crews from CalFire and Pacific Gas and Electric Co. also are at work using chain saws and wood chippers to remove dangerous trees.

Kathryn Phillips, director of the Sierra Club California, said the die-off from drought should signal to policy makers the urgency of curbing pollution that contributes to climate change.

“This is a warning to all of us,” she said. “We need to cut our air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions more. We’re on the right path, but we need to accelerate our effort.”

Sierra snowmelt runoff coming up short

By Kurtis Alexander, San Francisco Chronicle

The El Niño-fueled storms that coated the Sierra with nearly normal snow this winter brought blasts of hope to drought-weary California.

But after the flurries stopped and the seasons changed, the melt-off from the high country has been swift and disappointingly scant, according to new water supply estimates

from the state.

The Department of Water Resources now projects that the mountains will produce about three quarters of normal runoff during the months of heaviest snowmelt, shorting the rivers and reservoirs that typically provide a third of California’s water – and cementing a fifth year of historic drought for the Golden State.

Read the whole story