

Calif. water system stretched to limit, officials say



An arm of Lake Oroville on June 22 is nearly depleted.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Dale Kasler, Sacramento Bee

A plan to save endangered fish has pushed California's fragile water system almost to the breaking point, putting additional strain on farmers while drawing down reservoirs at Folsom and Oroville to historically low levels.

At an informal hearing Wednesday of the State Water Resources Control Board, federal and state regulators acknowledged they're struggling to hold California's water infrastructure together amid dwindling supplies and increasing anger from farmers, legislators and others.

With the drought in its fourth year, officials said the next few weeks could prove crucial – not only for endangered fish, but also for farmers throughout California who have planted crops based on earlier expectations of more generous water supplies.

“In my business, we get no do-overs,” said John Azevedo, a San Joaquin Valley farmer who is president of the Patterson Irrigation District. “I can’t unplant my crops.”

He and others, joined by state legislators, urged the water board to make more water available for agriculture this year, saying billions of dollars worth of crops in the ground are in danger. Environmentalists countered by saying several endangered fish species could go extinct if more water isn’t earmarked for them.

Read the whole story

Aircraft checking for dead trees in California

By Jane Braxton Little, Sacramento Bee

Low-flying helicopters are joining the legion of machinery responding to the state’s fourth-year drought.

Helicopters flying at treetop level throughout rural Northern California are checking for dead and dying trees near power lines, where they pose fire hazards.

The aircraft, contracted by Pacific Gas and Electric Co., have found thousands of trees in need of removal or pruning, said Paul Moreno, a spokesman for the utilities company.

Drought has weakened trees throughout the state and left others susceptible to disease or insects.

Read the whole story

Water, sage grouse dominate governors' forum



This year's annual Western Governors' Association conference is in Incline Village. Photo/Provided

By Anne Knowles

INCLINE VILLAGE – Water data and sage grouse were the main topics on the opening day of the Western Governors' Association annual meeting.

The three-day conference kicked off June 24 with the release

of the WGA's drought forum report, what Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval, WGA's current chairman, called a "living document."

The report was introduced during the initial panel, which included governors from nine western states as well as a consultant from Deloitte Consulting and Oklahoma's secretary of Energy and Environment.

The panel was followed by a keynote speech by Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell, who took questions from the governors. They were mostly concerned with the possible listing of the sage grouse as an endangered species.

The drought report is a broad overview of the WGA's findings with links to its website for more detailed information on the group's yearlong investigation of the drought, including meeting videos and webinars, and resources such as the U.S. Drought Monitor from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and stream flow and runoff data from the U.S. Geological Survey.



Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell is working to keep her department's budget intact. Photo/Provided

The report is more a resource than a remedy and makes no specific recommendations.

Sandoval said there is no cookie cutter solution for the affected states.

"What is certain is this unprecedented drought is a critical issue if not the critical issue for the west," Sandoval said.

The report focuses on seven areas, including conservation and infrastructure, but the WGA panel zeroed in on one: data and analysis.

Manson Brown, assistant secretary of commerce for environmental observation and prediction, said the data says there is no let up in sight.

"The seasonal outlook though Sept. 15 is for the drought to persist or intensify west of the Rockies," he said.

Brown was asked by several governors how reliable is the data since the states rely on it to make policy. Brown said the farther out the timeframe, the less trustworthy the forecast, but that technology will soon allow a 30-day forecast as reliable as today's 10-day outlook.

"They are very accurate, but there is always uncertainty in a hypercomplex system like the Earth," he said.

William Sarni, director and practice leader for water strategy social impact at Deloitte Consulting, said it's important to find better ways to convey the data.

"There is a lot of information out there and we need to present it better visually to engage people," Sarni said.

The report itself says "groundwater data, predictive climate models for drought and analytical tools that allow users to compare multiple datasets over time were all cited ... as ongoing needs."

Jewell in her keynote speech implored the governors to help convince Congress not to cut the Interior budget by a proposed 15 percent.

"We really need to move beyond this mindless sequestration,"

said Jewell.

The administration is also working on moving wildfire money into the disaster budget, she said.

In the morning before the WGA meeting, Jewell and Sandoval met with firefighters and personnel working to contain the 17,000-acre Washington Fire south of Markleeville.



Gov. Brian Sandoval is host of this year's governors' conference. Photo/Provided

Jewell said she is hopeful the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will decide not to add sage grouse to the endangered species list, a decision expected in September.

Utah Gov. Gary Herbert said his state's sage grouse management plan was 75 pages versus the Bureau of Land Management's plan encompassed in four large binders.

"I want to protect the sage grouse, but not to the detriment of economic development," said Herbert, who added that other interests were using the bird in hopes of killing further oil and gas development.

Wyoming Gov. Matthew Mead wondered if the sage grouse pointed to a bigger problem with the act.

"Regardless of the decision there's going to be lawsuits and

some judge will decide,” said Mead. “Is the Endangered Species Act working then?”

Jewell conceded there have been problems with the act, but that her department was working on involving states and scientists up front to make sure listings weren’t too easy to get.

Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey, Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper, Idaho Gov. Butch Otter, Montana Gov. Steve Bullock, North Dakota Gov. Jack Dalrymple as well as Guam Gov. Eddie Calvo also took part in the panel.

The meeting continues through Friday morning at the Hyatt Regency in Incline Village.

Science helps golf courses reduce water use

By Katharine Gammon, Inside Science

In California’s current historic drought, there’s one particularly easy target when it comes to pointing fingers: green golf courses.

Courses around the U.S. suck up around approximately 2.08 billion gallons of water per day for irrigation. That’s about 130,000 gallons per day per course, according to the golf industry.

In California, Gov. Jerry Brown has announced a statewide mandate to reduce water consumption by 25 percent – but that number actually varies depending on the water district, signifying a reduction of anywhere between 4 and 36 percent.

Since there are about 1,140 golf courses in California, reducing water use by one quarter would reduce consumption by 37 million gallons of water per day – about a million bathtubs full.

The golf industry uses a substantial amount of water and is therefore working on ways to make courses more sustainable, with new irrigation technologies, new types of grass, and new layouts that are easier on the environment.

Read the whole story

Calif. renewable energy debate heating up

By Jeremy B. White, Sacramento Bee

A political fight over California's renewable energy industry is playing out in the corridors of power, but it deals with something closer to home: your rooftop.

Capitol policymakers are advancing an ambitious proposal to have renewable sources generate half of the state's electricity by 2030, up from the 33 percent benchmark already in law.

The full force of California's political establishment backs the goal: Gov. Jerry Brown pitched the idea, Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de León, D-Los Angeles, has promoted it aggressively, and bills enshrining the new standard passed both the Senate and the Assembly with strong Democratic support.

The question now seems less whether the new goal will be

enacted than how utilities will get there. With the clean energy industry anticipating an opportunity for more business, California's rooftop solar firms are fighting to be included – and meeting resistance from other industry players.

Read the whole story

Guns in the U.S.: For every criminal killed in self-defense, 34 innocent people die

By Christopher Ingraham, Washington Post

“The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is with a good guy with a gun.” says Wayne LaPierre, the vice president of the National Rifle Association.

That's become the kernel of the NRA's response to recent mass shooting tragedies – if only more people carried guns for protection, the thinking goes, then they would be less likely to be victimized by gun-wielding criminals.

“The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is with a good guy with a gun,” LaPierre said

The challenge to that argument is that, data show, guns are rarely used in self-defense – especially relative to the rate at which they're used in criminal homicides or suicides.

Read the whole story

Response to Washington Fire questioned

Updated June 24 10:03pm:

“Fire is burning in hazardous and inaccessible terrain and approaching an increasing number of structures and impacting travel corridors,” authorities report.

Updated June 24 6:19pm:

The fire has grown to 17,205 acres and is 10 percent contained.

There are now 900 people fighting the fire that was started by lightning.

Warmer temperatures are expected through Saturday, with a possible record high on Friday. Thunderstorms are forecast for Saturday and Sunday. The moisture would be helpful, but the threat of more lightning is worrisome to fire agencies throughout the area.

Updated June 24 8:40am:

Firefighters have 5 percent containment of the Washington Fire. The acreage burned is 16,544. Nearly 700 people are now fighting the fire.

By Kathryn Reed and Susan Wood

People who live and work in the area are raising questions about the response time of the Washington Fire.

The initial response was June 19 at 7pm, according to fire officials. By Saturday night the fire was at 350 acres, by

Sunday night the acreage consumed was 6,500, by Monday night it reached 14,942 acres and as of Tuesday evening the burned area is 16,543 acres.

“The fire was reported at noon to 1 on Friday. There were no winds until Saturday. No one did anything about it. There are a variety of things they could have done. Well, that’s Alpine County for you,” Tom Abdoo, Markleeville property and business owner, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

U.S. Forest Service spokesman Larry Lucas said the Forest Service took over the fire at 6am June 22. He has asked local authorities for a time line detailing the response to the fire.

Lightning started the fire, the wind then spread it.



Smoke fills the drive into Carson City via Spooner Summit on June 23. Photo/Susan Wood

However, the fire is burning on Forest Service land in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest so the feds should have had authority the entire time.

A Forest Service employee told *Lake Tahoe News* their firehouses are not staffed around the clock during the fire season.

Alpine County itself is serviced by a volunteer fire department.

Any delay in getting resources to the fire could have been the result of who was notified first. People don't tend to call the USFS dispatch. Instead, they call 911. Which dispatch center that call goes to depends on the nearest cell tower to the caller.

In 2007 during the start of the Angora Fire the 911 calls went to CHP dispatch in Truckee which at first told everyone it was a controlled burn and not to worry.

The weather conditions on that June 24 were very similar to this past weekend's – high winds and low humidity. These conditions had been in the forecast, with the National Weather Service having issued alerts about red flag days for the entire weekend.

With Angora, 254 houses were reduced to ash in a matter of hours. With the Washington Fire, 15 buildings are in imminent danger and the town of Markleeville is threatened. Fire officials on the night of June 23, though, didn't have information about how far the flames are from this Alpine County town.

Lake Valley has sent one engine to the Washington Fire, while Tahoe Douglas has firefighters in San Bernardino.

Most of the Tahoe agencies are staying put because the local conditions warrant firefighters being on alert. The state

mutual aid system is voluntary, so departments don't have to send crews if the local needs warrant staying put.

The Forest Service is using 11 helicopters, eight air tankers – including two DC-10s, 17 engines, three water tenders, and about 500 people to fight the Washington Fire. At one point the blaze was 10 percent contained, but the conditions worsened and the firefighters lost the upper hand. There is no containment this evening.

What it is costing to fight the fire each day has not been disclosed.

On a related note, Liberty Utilities has canceled the June 24 and July 1 planned power outage for parts of Alpine County because of the fire. The outage was scheduled to allow crews to replace power poles in the area.

Taxing time ahead for Nevada business

By Bill O'Driscoll, Reno Gazette-Journal

Come July, life will get more taxing for Nevada business.

That's when the so-called "commerce tax," a new state levy based on annual gross revenue and the core of the historic tax package approved by the 2015 Legislature, starts.

The first annual payment to the state Department of Taxation won't be due for another year – summer 2016 – but the levy will be based on gross revenue generated within Nevada's borders as of July 1, 2015.

And, observers say, it behooves businesses – even those small enough not to meet the tax’s minimum threshold of \$4 million annual adjusted gross revenue – to pay attention now given its size and complexity.

Read the whole story

Alpine County increasing network of trails

By Kathryn Reed

Building a trail from Turtle Rock Park in Markleeville to Grover Hot Springs seemed like a simple enough of an idea. Then the proponents hit the wall of bureaucracy.

“Basically we discovered that it was going to be a big ordeal or a lot of challenges to create the trail. There were some big expenses we were not prepared or able to cover,” Andy Lovell, president of the Alpine Trails Association, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

However, the Alpine Trails Association members have penetrated the bureaucratic wall and are on course to make their dream a reality. Memorandums of understandings are being worked on with landowners. It’s possible that trail will break ground in 2018, with completion in 2020.

The association formed in summer 2013 with the main desire of creating that one trail. The U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and California State Parks own the land where the trail would be built. Each has a process, criteria, rules, regulations and hoops to abide by or jump through. It’s not

just taking a shovel to the ground, the trails group has learned.



Alpine County's trail network is growing.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

The 47-member Alpine Trails Association has not been deterred. The group spent the better part of 2014 creating a 501(c)3 nonprofit, recruiting members, taking classes, reaching out to other established groups like the Tahoe Rim Trail Association and Carson Valley Trails Association, and building relationships with the land owners.

"We have become much more adept at what we are doing because of the lessons given by people in more knowledgeable associations," Lovell said. "It's good if all trails are made in the same way with the same expectations of the people who use them."

Now, trails the Alpine group hadn't thought about are getting built.

In talking with the BLM about trails, the group learned the federal agency had a shovel ready project – just no one to build it. This was the 1.1-mile interpretive loop around Curtz Lake in Markleeville. This trail was finished at the end of May. A couple signs still need to be installed.

The association wrote a proposal to the BLM earlier this year to expand the trail system in that area and into the Indian

Creek Recreation Lands. BLM agreed to it and now the association is tasked with 11 miles of trail work. This is one reason why the Grover project has been pushed back a few years.

“The most important thing is to connect Turtle Rock to the interpretive trail. It is just over one mile,” Lovell said. “It will tie in our entire trail system. Turtle Rock will become the hub. It will connect from there to all the Indian Creek Recreation Lands trails.”

The Alpine group and BLM have agreements for the trail builders to work on an eight-mile loop that connects Indian Creek Reservoir, the East Fork of the Carson River, Curtz Lake and Summit Lake.

Lovell had high praise for BLM in regards to how easy the agency has been to work with as well as the ability to use their tools.

A \$10,000 grant that was awarded last week to the trails group by Alpine County will pay for a shed and tools. This in turn will mean the group can invite more people out on trail building days because there will be enough tools for volunteers.

This is the first grant the association has received. Members plan to keep writing more so the trail system in Alpine County continues to grow.

“We have other plans to expand that trial system on the Eastern Slope of the Sierra in Alpine County,” Lovell said. “We are hoping to connect with Woodfords and Markleeville.”

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Notes:

- For more info about the Alpine Trails Association, email Andy Lovell at ata.andyl@gmail.com.

- The group also has a website.
 - Workdays are in the spring and fall on Tuesday and Saturdays from 9am-2pm.
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Casinos improve efforts to fight money laundering

By J.D. Morris, Las Vegas Sun

The gaming industry's fight against criminals who want to use casinos to disguise illegal money was front and center Thursday at the Paris resort.

There, industry leaders and government officials gathered for a conference that addressed how casinos are handling their obligations under anti-money-laundering law.

The verdict, according to one government official: Casinos have done a better job lately of reporting suspicious financial activity, but there's still room for improvement.

Last year, the director of the Treasury Department's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network – or FinCEN – spoke at this same Bank Secrecy Act conference and reminded the casino industry of how it needs to instill itself with a “culture of compliance” when it comes to money-laundering law.

Read the whole story