

Project launched to keep sage grouse off threatened list

By Las Vegas Sun

The Obama administration is launching an effort to accelerate protection of sage grouse along the Nevada-California line with \$31 million in spending commitments through 2024 to help ranchers and others improve grouse habitat.

A top official in the Agriculture Department told the Associated Press that Friday's announcement may represent the best, last chance to keep the Nevada and California population of the bird off the list of threatened species.

Jason Weller, chief of the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, says that while the multiagency effort targets California and Nevada, it ultimately will benefit the overall habitat of the greater sage grouse in 11 western states.

Read the whole story

Half of U.S. homes at risk from natural disaster

By Constantine von Hoffman, Money Watch

More than half of all U.S. homes are located in areas prone to tornadoes, earthquakes or hurricanes.

About 71 million housing units, or 55 percent of the nation's

total, fall into the high risk category, with 10.6 million of these, or 8 percent of the total, classified as very high risk, according to a report from RealtyTrac.

The report is based on historical and predictive data from the U.S. Geological Survey and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration regarding the likelihood of a given county being hit by a 5.0 magnitude or greater earthquake over the next 50 years or highly destructive hurricanes and tornadoes.

“It’s fairly obvious from looking at the map that these high-risk areas tend to be places where a lot of people want to live, like along the coast,” said Daren Blomquist, vice president at RealtyTrac, which provides real estate data. “While we’re not expecting this to cause a mass exodus from those areas, at least when home buyers are looking at a house they should take it into consideration along with the other factors that can affect home value.”

Higher-risk areas around the country – such as San Diego and Riverside counties in Southern California, Manhattan and Brooklyn in New York, and the Boston metro area – generally have higher home prices than lower risk regions. Median home prices in the eight counties adjudged as being at low risk for natural disasters averaged \$161,000 in April, while prices in the 12 high-risk counties averaged \$377,483, according to RealtyTrac.

Read the whole story

Plenty of hot water to enjoy around Lake Tahoe



MontBleu's spa is open to the public – for a fee.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

Soaking in hot water has a history dating to the 4th century BC. There's been quite an evolution from hot stones being placed in water to today's fiberglass tubs found in so many Lake Tahoe back yards.

It was in the 1940s that hot tubs started to become popular in the United States.

Nearly every hotel in the Lake Tahoe Basin has a hot tub. Plus, there are a few natural springs in the area that people may enjoy.

The following is a sampling of tubs in the region and beyond.

With a hot tub somewhat shaped like a three-leaf clover, people are able to spread out at **MontBleu** in Stateline. And this is good because there were loud, splashing children in one section.

It's one of the more chlorinated tubs. Sue's eyes began to sting when she lifted her hands to her face. The depth is a bit much for someone of her stature. She had to crouch and couldn't sit comfortably.

But the temp is ideal. The jets had a ton of pressure, which I would think some people would not like. I thought it was wonderful.

There is also a tub in each of the dressing rooms if people want to stay more secluded. The women's tub was the perfect temp and the depth good for shorter people. The dim lighting makes it even more relaxing. The jets put out just the right amount of oomph.

Hotel guests may use the pool and adjacent hot tub for free, guests must pay \$10 to use the indoor tub and locker room facilities, and it's \$20 for non-hotel guests to use everything.



Grover Hots Springs in Markleeville is popular with locals and tourists.
Photo/LTN

Tahoe Keys has two outdoor hot tubs that are accessed via the indoor pool. People must live in this South Lake Tahoe neighborhood or have access to guest passes to be allowed in.

The secluded feeling is great. The 103-degree temp is perfect, especially when the outside temp is below freezing. The depth is ideal. The jets could use a little more force.

No one younger than 6 is allowed in them. And one does not allow anyone younger than 14 so it's a quasi-adult tub.

Lots of signs warn people no alcohol is allowed and if people are caught with any, they could lose their privileges to use the facilities. There is also 24-hour recorded surveillance.

Several hours one Saturday afternoon in early January were spent in the pools at **David Walley's Hot Springs Resort** in Genoa. We were happy to have two gift certificates because we're not sure it's worth the \$30. A lot of this has to do with having our own hot tub and not making a whole day of it. The value really depends on how much time one spends at Walley's. We've been there in the spring when it's cold at the lake and warm in the valley. It's a great spot to start working on your tan.

The scenery is wonderful – even though the mountains should have had way more snow.

The five tubs are supposed to range in temperature from 100 to 104 degrees. The larger pool is about 85 degrees. An employee is regularly checking the temps.

Two of the older hot tubs have been taken out since the ownership changed in the past couple years. An employee said there is talk of adding more tubs.

Be careful about wearing jewelry into the waters. My toe ring is now a different color because of the sulfur.

The other natural spring that is nearby is **Grover Hot Springs**,

which is part of a state park by the same name in Markleeville. Cost is \$7. Hours change in the summer, but it's open seven days a week.

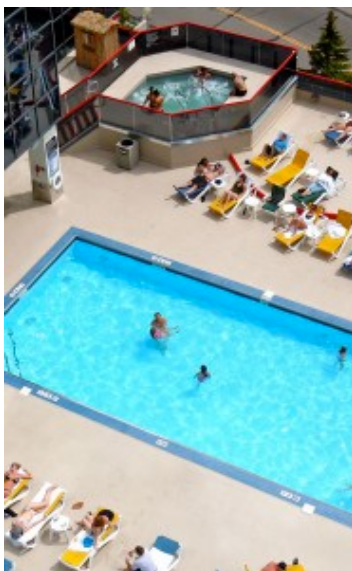
It's one big pool that is fed by water that is percolating from the hillside. The surroundings are spectacular. This is definitely more rustic than Walley's, but that is part of its charm. It's definitely a social place, but that can be a drawback because it can get crowded.

At **Nepheles** in South Lake Tahoe hot tubs may be rented by the hour. They are available from 2pm to 2am at \$20/hour for two people. The more people, the more it costs. Towels are provided.

It had been years since Sue and I had been there. They are private, though there is no ceiling. This is perfect – being outdoors, but secluded. Amazingly, we had no trouble staying there for an hour. The temperature was ideal.

Hooks and benches are provided to put stuff on. But if were snowing and there were several people, clothing might get wet.

One of the perks at Nepheles is that there is an intercom to the bar. We tried it repeatedly and no one ever responded. While not the end of the world, it was disappointing.



The hot tub at
Harveys is
elevated away
from the pool.

Photo/LTN

Harveys hot tub is outside, but on the fourth floor. The outer railing for the entire area gives it a secluded feeling. It's not until getting to the far side can one look down on all the rebar and concrete for what might be the completed Chateau project.

The tub is small considering how many hotel rooms there are. But on a weekend in May there is ample room for everyone. The biggest disappoint is that for what otherwise is a 24-hour facility, the pool-hot club closes at 9pm.

The temperature was perfect. But the depth of the bench to sit on to the top of the tub is so high that I can't put my arms out as a way to cool off. It reminded me in some ways of being in an old redwood tub. Not the most comfortable seating.

Tubs outside the area

It almost seems like the hot tub at the **Hyatt House in Rancho Cordova** was an afterthought based on how tiny it is. I don't know how much use it gets when the outside temp is in triple digits, but in February plenty of people wanted to use it, including members of a Zephyr Cove tennis team and a Sonora high school wrestling team who were all in town to compete. Not everyone could fit.

Also disappointing was how rapidly the temperature decreased when the bubbles were on. And the jets were a bit spastic. There also ought to be rules about young kids in hot tubs – like not allowing them or having an adults only hot tub.

A trip to Reno in December found us at the **Atlantis**. The only problem was getting to the hot tub because we were barefoot

and there was ice melt on the walk. We couldn't go in before bed because access closes at 10pm, so we popped in first thing in the morning.

The temp was ideal on this frosty morning. With the bubbles going, there were no distracting sounds. The tall hotel towers make the tub seem secluded.

The **Residence Inn by Marriott in Folsom** couldn't seem to get the temp right on the hot tub when the two of us were there in March. When it's so hot that after less than five minutes you want to sit on the edge, there is too much heat. The next day the water was so tepid I got out quickly and opted for the shower to relax me.



Walley's has multiple tubs to choose from.
Photo/Provided

The other problem was how muggy the room was. The hot tub and pool are inside.

Not knowing what we would find next, we chose to go next door to the **Courtyard by Marriott**. The water was the perfect temperature. I liked that some of the jets were more powerful than others.

And the setting is better than its sister hotel because of all the windows by the tub look out onto a courtyard where people could be sun bathing.

If relaxation is what you want, then skip the tub at the **Marriott Marquis in San Francisco**. Sounds of screaming children in the nearby pool reverberate off the walls. Plus, it's another one of those instances where kids fill up the hot tub, too. But the size and temperature are good.

It was hard to know we were in the middle of Sonoma while soaking at the **Sonoma Valley Inn** tub. This Best Western is just off the Sonoma square. The tub and nearby pool are in a courtyard with mature landscaping. It's almost like a park setting. The hot tub is covered by a gazebo, which would act as nice protection from the sun on hot days. The bubbles were a bit spastic – causing water to fly into our wine glasses. But the temp and depth were ideal.

Petition seeks return of grizzly to Calif.

By Susan Montoya Bryan, AP

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. – An environmental group called on federal wildlife managers Wednesday to update a decades-old recovery plan for grizzly bears to ensure the animal's return to the Grand Canyon and other areas of the West.

The Center for Biological Diversity, in a petition filed with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, accused the agency of using a fragmented approach as it tries to recover the threatened species. Efforts are currently focused on a fraction of the bear's historic range, but the petition identifies 110,000 square miles around the West that could provide suitable habitat.

Those areas include a forested region straddling the Arizona-New Mexico border, the Grand Canyon, the Sierra Nevada in California, and parts of Utah and Colorado.

The recovery plan for grizzlies dates back to 1993. The Center for Biological Diversity says the plan needs to consider recent research that questions the long-term viability of the current grizzly population.

"The science is clear that, if we're serious about recovering grizzly bears, we need more populations around the West and more connections between them so they don't fall prey to inbreeding and so they have a chance of adapting to a warming world," said Noah Greenwald, director of the center's endangered species program.

A spokesman with the Fish and Wildlife Service said Wednesday the agency had not yet received the petition. He did not comment on whether the agency had any existing plans to update the grizzly's recovery plan.

The agency did state as part of a review of the bear's status done in 2011 that the recovery plan was outdated and it needed to consider other areas as potential habitat.

According to the agency, an estimated 50,000 grizzlies roamed between the Pacific Ocean and Great Plains during the early 1800s. Their numbers were drastically reduced as more pioneers headed west. By 1975, when the bears were listed, only six of the 37 separate populations that were present just 50 years earlier remained.

There are five areas where grizzlies are found today, including the Yellowstone region and along the northern Continental Divide.

Federal wildlife managers have had mixed success in trying to reintroduce larger species, such as the gray wolf.

Greenwald acknowledged there would be some opposition to the grizzly, but he said there seemed to be more reverence surrounding the bear.

“The grizzly is the mascot of the University of Montana, and you drive around Montana and it’s grizzly this and grizzly that. And in California, they’re on the state flag. They’re just such an iconic animal,” he said.

Rising college costs push students to tech schools

By Tim Grant, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

While most high school students still plan to go the traditional route of attending four-year colleges and universities when they consider educational options after graduation, a significant number say they are open to the idea of attending community colleges and technical schools

The Washington, D.C.-based College Savings Foundation’s fifth annual “How Youth Plan to Fund College” survey of high school students across the country found many are broadening their perception of what higher education means. One-in-five, or 21 percent, said they think of vocational or career schools in the same way they think of public or private college.

Prior surveys did not ask that question so there is no way to compare past attitudes toward community college and vocational schools.

Cost continues to be a hot topic for families and students – a

reality reinforced when President Obama issued an executive order attempting to ease loan-related stresses many face following graduation from college or other post-high school educational programs.

Read the whole story

SLT making it lucrative to redevelop at the Y



Tahoe Valley – aka the Y in South Lake Tahoe – may become more of a destination. Renderings/Design Workshop

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe officials believe the best way to get people

to renovate their properties is to dangle a carrot in front of them. For those with property in the Tahoe Valley Area Plan, the carrots are coverage and commercial floor area.

At a meeting Thursday night about the plan, where only a handful of residents showed up, it was revealed that incentives are part of the draft plan.

"Some properties in Tahoe Valley are 70 percent or 100 percent covered," John Hitchcock, planner with South Lake Tahoe, said. "Either they can't afford the fees or they don't want to rip out the coverage."

Tahoe Regional Planning Agency has rules about how much of a property can be covered with an impervious material. When it comes time to remodel, mitigation fees come into play. Either that, or the end result must be less coverage to comply with the regulations.

The city plans to match coverage transfers in certain instances. Projects will have to meet city environmental and economic goals to receive the incentives.

The city will create specific criteria for when incentives would be allowed.

Commercial floor area (CFA) is another TRPA-created commodity. Based on the Regional Plan, jurisdictions in the basin have 200,000-square-feet of CFA to use. The city has less than 50,000 square feet banked and will get another 15,000 square feet from the TRPA when the Tahoe Valley Area Plan is approved.



Above, is what a section of the Tahoe Valley are looks like today. Right, is conceptually what it could become.



TRPA limits development with CFA instead of allowing jurisdictions to use more traditional zoning methods.

The incentives are being used so the plan gets implemented instead of being a document that collects dust or is disregarded on some computer server.

Some of the written comments about the plan include having large swaths of landscaping in front of buildings to keep an open feel and not impacting views of ridgelines.

Hitchcock said that while the design of future buildings or redevelopment projects will have a mountain theme, there is leeway for creativity.

People also said they have no desire for the Y to look like the Stateline end of town.

The stormwater basins are still projected to be turned into a greenbelt that people could use for walking and biking.

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Notes:

- For more info, go online.
- The draft Tahoe Valley Area Plan and notice of preparation of an EIR/EIS will go before the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency June 25, to the City Council on July 1 and to the

Planning Commission July 10.

- The final plan is expected to be released later this summer, with it going to the City Council for adoption in the fall and likely to TRPA in December.
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Nev. lobbies to oppose bigger trucks on roads

By Amber Phillips, Las Vegas Sun

Could the commercial trucks we share our highways with be getting bigger?

Congress is mulling an idea to allow bigger and heavier semitrailers on American roads. There's nothing set in stone yet, but the idea floating around Capitol Hill has transportation safety and law enforcement advocates worried enough to fly out to Washington, D.C., and try to convince lawmakers otherwise.

Two Nevada advocates are part of the delegation talking to lawmakers in Washington this week. They say the state has seen its fair share of traffic accidents and fatalities from big trucks.

In 2012, 450 crashes and 18 deaths in Nevada were tied to big trucks, said Richard Tiran, the president of the Peace Officers Research Association of Nevada.

Read the whole story

Drought conditions worsen in California

By Caitlin Owens, Los Angeles Times

California's drought conditions have worsened over the past week with the percentage of the state suffering from the highest category increasing, the National Weather Service said Thursday.

"Exceptional" drought conditions have spread in Central California since a week ago, weather officials said. Areas in Northern California have also moved into this category since last week, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

Almost 33 percent of the state faces exceptional conditions. About 25 percent of the state faced those conditions last week.

Every part of California remains in what is considered severe drought.

A year ago, no part of the state was in exceptional drought conditions, the weather service said.

Read the whole story

Grand jury: El Dorado County is dysfunctional

By Kathryn Reed

A year after the El Dorado County Grand Jury was disbanded mid-session, the next group investigated 20 issues.

The county is dysfunctional in many aspects was the conclusion. The final report was released Thursday.

The report says, "Early in its term, the grand jury began to see a thread of dysfunction running through El Dorado County government. The grand jury heard repeated testimony of three practices, which would seriously jeopardize efficiency in any organization and are especially troublesome in an organization with the complexity, varied duties and size of El Dorado County government:

1. Elected officials can refuse to cooperate with both the Board of Supervisors and the county's chief administrative officer.
2. Department heads both elected and appointed went around the CAO directly to the Board of Supervisors in support of their own positions to the detriment of the county as a whole.
3. Individual members of the Board of Supervisors interfered in the day to day administration of the county."

All of this, according to the report, came at the expense of taxpayer dollars, wasted time and work not getting done.

The jury found that the county's Charter is in part to blame because it allows elected officials beyond the Board of Supervisors to have power that an ordinary employee would not likely have. The recommendation is to only have the elected positions that are required by the state Constitution –

district attorney, sheriff, assessor and Board of Supervisors.

"We are going to seriously consider the contents of the grand jury report regarding the dysfunction of the county and we do plan to respond," Stephanie McCorkle told *Lake Tahoe News*. McCorkle's firm has been hired by the county to do public relations work.

She added that much of what the grand jury found the county had earlier uncovered in a survey it did.

The county has to review the Charter every five years and started to do so last week by a committee. Those meetings are open to the public. The supervisors would have to approve changes to the Charter and then the voters would make the final decision.

Other key grand jury investigations:

- Sixteen employees of the South Lake Tahoe Probation Office were questioned. "The employees interviewed are intelligent, well spoken, and dedicated. They have college degrees and many years of probation experience. Yet, most described the work place environment as **toxic**. Supervisors and managers micromanage employees; fostering and allowing a *clique* system that identifies employees as either favored, or shunned, by management." (The emphasis was written by the grand jury.)

The recommendation is the new chief needs to make eliminating the cliques a priority.

"The cumulative result, described by employees and some managers, is poor morale in and dysfunction of the SLT Probation office as a whole, detracting from their overall mission to enforce court orders."

The recommendation is for the skills of managers and supervisors to be reviewed, as well as looking at the worker to manager ratio.

"El Dorado County hired a new chief probation officer on Dec. 2, 2013. A week after beginning his duties, the grand jury disclosed its findings about the working environment in the South Lake Tahoe office to him. Four months later the new chief reported back that he had not found the toxic work environment and had made no substantive change to personnel or policies. The grand jury then re-interviewed SLT personnel who reported that, in fact, the same toxic environment continues."

- The grand jury found that when the county waived the permit fees for property owners in the Angora Fire burn area, this was a gift of public funds. The same goes for other times the Board of Supervisors waived fees.

"The grand jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors no longer waive or reimburse permit fees unless they are specifically allowed by a board policy, California Constitution or state statute. Waving fees in an ad hoc manner gives the impression of collusion and favoritism."

- The animal shelter in Placerville came under scrutiny for how the county deals with real estate acquisitions and leasing protocols. Environmental report, architectural studies and leasing temporary property cost the county hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"The Grand Jury recommends the Facilities Investment Team concept be kept active, but reviewed by the CAO on a regular basis for its effectiveness. Although we found no evidence of improprieties, the same individual was used in each of the four projects where a real estate broker was utilized."

- It was determined that toxic limestone waste continues to flow into Webber Creek from the former Diamond Lime Plant site, and that no one is doing anything about it. "It would be completely irresponsible of the county to allow the Diamond Dorado Parkway project to proceed without ensuring that all environmental issues and mitigations have been resolved."

- The grand jury received multiple complaints about improper grading on private property that affected other properties. Investigation led the jury to conclude that there “was a pattern and practice of failing to comply with the county Grading Ordinance.”

The ultimate finding was, “The county’s failure to enforce its Grading, Erosion and Sediment Control Ordinance encourages illegal grading to the detriment of other property owners and residents.”

Some things the grand jury looks into are mandated by the state – like checking on the management and conditions of the county jails each year, as well as the juvenile detention facilities.

The South Lake Tahoe and Placerville jails have a difficult time hiring women, have been impacted by the state sending prisoners to the county jails, and mental illness is a growing problem among inmates.

The jury recommends because of the age of both facilities replacement of them should be considered, and that management should look into why there is high staff turnover.

Concerned citizens initiate other investigations. In the case of the probation department, it was an article in *Lake Tahoe News* that prompted the probe.

In the final report released June 19, grand jury foreman Neil Cunningham said if the county adheres to the recommendations, “El Dorado County will follow the lead of many other California counties and step in to the 21st century.”

Public agencies have 90 days to file a written response to the grand jury’s findings, while elected officials or department heads have 60 days.

Californians failing at water conservation

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

As California slips into summer amid the worst drought in a generation, state residents, as a whole, have done relatively little to cut their water use, falling well short of the 20 percent target set in Gov. Jerry Brown's emergency drought declaration in January.

Between January and May of this year, California as a whole cut its water use 5 percent compared to the same period over the preceding three years, according to data released Tuesday during a meeting of the State Water Resources Control Board. The figures were drawn from a survey of water agencies across the state conducted by water board staff. The survey was sent to 443 water agencies but completed by only 270, representing about 25 million retail water customers.

Max Gomberg, a senior environmental scientist for the board, said water use actually increased statewide in January, a month that is normally the state's wettest but instead proved to be extraordinarily dry. During February through April – months immediately following the governor's drought declaration – there was no significant conservation. Water use statewide was essentially the same in those months as the prior three years.

Only in May did conservation seemingly take hold, with water agencies in aggregate reporting a water savings of 25 percent. That seems encouraging, but it was before the hot months of summer when water demand typically peaks.

Read the whole story