Calif. to protect wolf under Endangered Species Act

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

The wolf known as OR7 who roamed California for more than a year is now raising pups just over the state line in Oregon, wildlife officials have confirmed.

The news greatly increases the odds that gray wolves eventually will repopulate the Golden State. It comes on the same day that the California Fish and Game Commission, meeting in Fortuna on Wednesday, voted 3-1 to protect wolves under the state Endangered Species Act.

In a field visit to OR7's location in the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest on Monday, biologists observed two pups and photographed them peeking out of a log. Officials at the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife said it is "likely" there are more pups, because wolves typically produce four to six in a litter.

Read the whole story

STPUD ups rates; salary increases not decided

By Lesia Witkowsky

Water and sewer bills for South Tahoe Public Utility District customers will be going up July 1.

The board on a 5-0 vote made it official June 5.

Water rates will increase 6.5 percent for each of the next four years, with the fifth year being 5 percent. The base pay for people on water meters becomes 80 percent of the bill, with 15 percent being based on use. Sewer rates will be 6 percent higher each of the next five years.

About 20 people were in the room Thursday, with a few speaking from their seats. Many spoke about water meters and their legitimacy.

Residents are concerned that a lot of people in this town are on fixed wages and it is not easy for them to start spending more money for basics like water and sewer. A few also discussed the fact that meters will cost money to implement and were concerned with the fairness of everyone having to pay more money for water even if they barely use any, for example people who own homes here, but live full time in other cities.

Eric Schafer, board president, said how in a global sense meters encourage conservation by showing water consumption and therefore there are valid reasons for using them. Because meters are state mandated, the board has no choice but to ensure they are installed. They are also the best way to reduce water consumption because flat rates are hard to leverage pressure on customers to reduce water consumption, Schafer added.

He also reminded people that the staff recommendation was for higher water and sewer rate increases.

"We carry the burden of responsibility on whether or not we do the right thing. It's a brutal cost, but if you're trying to make sure of maintaining the system as it is or better, and make sure we don't have something that causes more significant increases down the road, then do the 9.5 percent," Schafer said. "If we're not doing enough, I think you need to relook at it and think about doing what's right and not what the notice say. I’m going to vote for this not because I believe it, but because I want my vote to at least be what is called for. It’s not my recommended approach, but that’s what I’m going to do.”

The notice he refers to is Proposition 218, which required a 45-day protest period. If 50 percent plus one ratepayers were to have filed a protest to the proposed rate increases, the district would not have been able to go forward no matter what the board wanted to do.

Water rate received 305 protests, or 2.17 percent of customers; sewer 342, or 1.88 percent of customers; and metered rate structure 260, or 1.85 percent.

The board has been discussing the possibility of raising rates since last fall. And the five have never been on the same page as to what the district should be asking of its ratepayers.

It’s been a case of does aging infrastructure get replaced now or sooner versus can ratepayers afford to pay more when so many still have not recovered from the economic downturn.

Board member Jim Jones agreed with Schafer that not enough money is being collected, especially when it comes to long-term equipment replacement.

Member Kelly Sheehan said, “Perhaps had there been smaller consistent rate increases, we wouldn’t be faced with the thought of a 9 percent increase or a 6 percent increase.”

Randy Vogelgesang, another board member, said, “It is our duty to carry out the wishes of the ratepayers to the extent that we can and still have a functioning district. In an ideal world we’d go with constant rates forever, but that includes capital improvement.”

Besides rate increases, the board approved the 2014-15 budget that takes effect July 1.

There are no cost of living increases for employees, but raises are not out of the question.

"Negotiations are under way with our union represented employees for a new MOU, since the current two-year contract expires in July of this year," General Manager Richard Solbrig told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The board discussed the latest proposal from the union in closed session at the end of the meeting, but no decision came from it. It's likely the salary question won't be resolved until July.

Regular step increases for employees who are not at the top of the pay scale will be given.

No changes have been made to other employee benefits.

Kathryn Reed contributed to this story.

Gap between wealthy travelers, others widens

By Christopher S. Rugaber, AP

NEW YORK — Private elevators, personal shopping assistants, six-bedroom suites with their own postal codes. Even helipads. This is what the super-rich have come to expect from hotels.

For others, vacation now means renting someone's apartment, a spare room, maybe just a couch — anything to save on the cost of a hotel.

As the gap between the wealthiest travelers and everyone else has widened, so has the way people are experiencing vacations. The wealthy are looking for ever-more pampering. Many others are seeking new ways to economize.

The Fairmont at Whistler is right on the slopes of the ski resort. Photo/LTN file

And the lodging industry is adapting – at the high and low ends – to meet the diverging needs.

Luxury hotels are catering to financial elites from Russia, China, Brazil or the Middle East who now routinely hop around the world and don't mind dropping $20,000 a night for a glamorous accommodation.

"High-end travel in the air, on the sea and on land has never been more robust," says Steve Carvell, an associate dean at Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration. "There are more people with more concentrated wealth."

Luxury hotels are arising even at iconic middle-American tourism spots such as Walt Disney World. Four Seasons will open a 444-room resort there in August with 68 suites, including a nine-bedroom royal suite sporting a 1,000 square-foot (93-square-meter) private terrace with views of the park's nightly fireworks.

During the Great Recession, many resorts dropped "resort and spa" from their name. The idea was to appeal to corporate organizers who didn’t want trips to seem extravagant. Excess now appears back in style.

In November, Four Seasons added the phrase “and residences” to its mountain resorts in Vail, Colorado; Jackson Hole, Wyoming; and Whistler, Canada. It’s pursuing families seeking a residential experience with the pampering of a hotel staff.

The six-bedroom suite in Vail fetches $15,000 a night. You get three living rooms and a movie room. The suite includes a dedicated assistant who can arrange airport transfers, private ski lessons and after-hours shopping.

The return of extravagance reflects one characteristic of the recovery: After paring their vacations along with everyone else during the recession, the wealthy have rebounded with force. Since 2009, hotel spending by the wealthiest 20 percent of Americans has risen about 6 percent, according to inflation-adjusted data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The middle 20 percent are still spending nearly 3 percent less.

To stretch their discretionary dollars, middle-income vacationers are fueling one of the industry’s growth areas: “limited service” lodgings. At Marriott’s Fairfield Inn, Hyatt Place and Holiday Inn Express, you get free Wi-Fi and breakfast. But there’s no bellman, concierge or restaurants.

The idea is to draw travelers who feel priced out of full-service hotels. People can still say, “I’m staying at the Marriott,” even if it’s the Fairfield Inn, says Bjorn Hanson, dean of New York University’s hospitality school.

But many people are seeking deeper savings through increasingly popular sites such as Airbnb that arrange for people to rent rooms or apartments. The number of listed accommodations has soared since Airbnb’s founding in 2008 to 550,000 — not far below Hilton’s 685,000 rooms worldwide. Some studies suggest that Airbnb could be cutting into budget hotels’ revenue.

Robin Lynch, 34, of New York City put 14 relatives, including her in-laws, in five Airbnb facilities in Brooklyn for her wedding last year. She estimates she paid roughly $200 a night, on average, compared with the $300 she’d expected for a hotel.

“That amounts to a lot of savings over seven days,” she says.

High unemployment and flat paychecks have spurred more people not only to stay in Airbnb rooms but also to list their own homes.

Eric Worley, 30, and his girlfriend stayed at an Airbnb home in Columbus, Ohio, for $59 a night — half the lowest hotel rate they could find.

“Not only am I saving money, I’m also helping out another person … by giving them some extra money,” he says. “I’d much rather do that than have a corporation overcharge me for what is essentially the same service.”

Sometimes, the cut-rate experience goes further that visitors had expected. Ann Carman, 32, of Yellow Springs, Ohio, had always wanted to stay in an Airstream trailer. When she and her boyfriend visited Austin, Texas, in December 2013, she found one in a backyard. They weren’t alone. Sharing their accommodations were a pig named Fern, two dogs and a rooster.

“I was like, ‘They’ve got a pig in their backyard, we’ve got to stay there,'” she says.

Airbnb hosts can charge less than hotels because they typically don’t pay accommodation taxes or meet safety or disability regulations. That’s sparked grumbling from hotels — and from localities that lose out on tax revenue.

The luxury sphere is also trying to expand its base. Chains such as the Ritz-Carlton and the Mandarin Oriental are pursuing not just the uber-rich but increasingly the merely affluent.

“My father would never have stayed in a luxury hotel,” Hanson says. “He didn’t think he belonged there, even though he might have been able to afford it.”

As more modestly rich travelers have checked in, these hotels have sought to provide more for the ultra-wealthy.

With the recently opened St. Regis Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, architects considered how much privacy to provide its most sumptuous suites, says Paul James, head of Starwood Hotels and Resorts’ luxury properties.

“Part of the Abu Dhabi conversation was: ‘Where does the helicopter land?'” James says.

More of the wealthiest travelers are now booking on shorter notice – sometime less than a day. The St. Regis Mardavall in Mallorca, Spain, got a call from a 30-something German asking about the local weather. The receptionist reported 85 degrees and blue skies. The traveler booked the largest available suite and said he’d arrive in an hour.

He made the call from his private jet circling above Madrid.

The elite traveler’s experience was precisely what the Rosewood London had in mind when it opened its Grand Manor House Wing in December. The six-bedroom complex offers three living rooms, a library and a dining table for eight. It has its own street entrance and private elevator. For $42,000 a night, guests get some extra bragging rights: Their suite has its own postal code.

Mark Herron, general manager of the Four Seasons Vail, notes that his hotel recently arranged for a guest to feed elephants at a local zoo – even though the zoo was closed.

Then there was a celebrity who had a craving for Kentucky

Fried Chicken. The nearest one was 28 miles way.

The hotel first tried to make it but couldn’t match the recipe. “Plus, the celebrity wanted the bucket,” Herron says.

Within an hour, the guest and his 21-person entourage had 10 buckets full of traditional and extra-crispy chicken.

Cornell’s Carvell has a theory about why anyone makes such extravagant requests.

“They’ll sometimes do it just to see if it can be done,” he says. “They don’t want to hear the word no.”

Carson City leads nation in warming trend

By Sandra Chereb, AP

CARSON CITY — Don Quilici has snookered a few Carson City newcomers with bets that it would snow the week of his birthday in early May.

Unsuspecting gamblers often don’t know that a sliver of the western Nevada city’s boundaries extend to Lake Tahoe and encompass Snow Valley Peak at a towering 9,214 feet.

“As an average, I’d win eight out of 10 years,” said Quilici, 80, a Carson City native.

Looking down on the Carson area from Snow Valley Peak. Photo/LTN file

Lately, though, he hasn't been so lucky. That's because Nevada's capital city is getting hotter.

An Associated Press analysis of federal temperature records shows Carson City has warmed the most than any other city in the nation in the last 30 years.

The average temperature in Carson City has risen 4.1 degrees since 1984. Boise, Idaho, came in second, posting a rise of 4 degrees. Las Vegas, known for its sweltering summers, was sixth, with an increase of 3.4 degrees.

But it's the boost in summertime heat that really makes Carson City stand out.

The average temperature for June, July and August has soared 6.8 degrees over the last three decades, 2.2 degrees warmer than second-place Boise and 2.4 degrees higher than third-place Las Vegas.

The summertime average temperature is up from about 68 degrees to nearly 75.

Because the data on cities are based on one weather station and readings can be affected by urban heating and development, trends are not as scientifically robust as those of states or regions within states, but they do have value, said National

Climatic Data Center monitoring chief Derek Arndt.

The change in Carson City is becoming noticeable in subtle ways.

Plants and trees are prone to bloom earlier, and more people are installing air conditioners. The systems were a rarity even a decade ago, when many residents didn't want to spend the money when only a couple of weeks in August seemed insufferable.

Justin Anderson, owner of Anderson Heating & Air Conditioning, in operation for 32 years, said he "never knew that so many people didn't have air conditioning before."

David Ruf of Greenhouse Garden Center was surprised by the amount of warming that's taken place but not by the warming itself.

Ruf, whose father started the business 40 years ago, keeps meticulous weather records.

"When we started here, usually there was a temperature swing between night and day of 45 degrees," Ruf said. "Now we seem to be 35 degrees."

He and other long-time residents note Carson City's geography. Nestled in a valley at the base of the Carson Range, the city is ringed by hills and mountains.

And as the city has grown, more roads, asphalt, homes and commercial development have cropped up — ingredients for heat absorption and urban warming.

In 1984, about 35,000 people lived here, government data say, and today the population is 55,000. Instead of fields and meadows, there are houses and commercial complexes.

Sam Lompa, who lives on a ranch in the heart of Carson City, feels the warming effects.

"When I was a kid, we never had any air conditioners," said Lompa, 71, who grew up on the ranch. Now he uses fans and a swamp cooler but doesn't fret much about the temperature.

"If it's hot, it's hot, and if it's cold, it's cold," he said.

Ruf, too, is skeptical of putting too much emphasis on temperature shifts, even though this May seemed unusually warm, with temperatures in the 80s.

"Every time I say it's getting hotter, the next year gets colder," Ruf said. "Mother Nature can still pack a wallop."

2-time ACC winner excited Sorenstam is playing

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Players having fun and interacting with the gallery – that's some of what sets watching Tahoe's celebrity golf tournament apart from the PGA or LPGA.

At least that's how two-time American Century Championship winner Jack Wagner sees it.

He was in town June 3 playing a round at Edgewood Tahoe before the July 15-20 tournament. Wagner, along with John Elway, Mike Eruzione and Jim McMahon are the only four to have played each year. This marks the 25th year of the event.

"This is our Masters/U.S. Open," Wagner said during a lunch at the golf course's restaurant. "It's real golf and there is a lot of fun golf."

While the actor-musician last won the tournament in 2011, this year he's favored to win it with 7:1 odds.

Who has the best odds is Annika Sorenstam at 2:1. Sorenstam, who has a second home in Incline Village, is thought of as the best women's golfer of all time. She retired in 2008 after having won 72 LPGA tournaments, including 10 majors and 18 other international tournaments.

Wagner's first preference of a playing partner would be his late father. But his celebrity choice is Sorenstam.

Jack Wagner talks June 3 about what it will be like to play with Annika Sorenstam in Tahoe's celebrity golf tournament. Photo/Kathryn Reed

"I would want to watch her rhythm, her tempo and say 'nice shot'," Wagner said.

"She has a great chance of winning. I think she will elevate everyone's game."

He doesn't take any issue with a former professional golfer being in the draw. Plus, she is going to be teeing off from the same markers as the guys in the field. Wagner also said Sorenstam is probably "rusty" so that could help the guys.

Besides his club tournament, the ACC is now the only tournament he plays.

“This tournament is the foundation of so many friendships,” Wagner said.

A group of seven or so guys would take golfing trips together. While those days are gone, Wagner said, “This is where we rekindle our friendships.”

He said they don’t spend time in the casinos, but instead spend the bulk of their time at Edgewood Tahoe.

But that’s not to say he hasn’t gambled. There was the first year when he went from the blackjack table to having to tee off.

Novasel, Brown to vie for District 5 supe seat

By Kathryn Reed

Sue Novasel and Kevin Brown, as the top two vote getters for El Dorado County District 5 supervisor, will be squaring off in November.

They never relinquished their lead as numbers started coming in just after 8pm June 3.

With all precincts reporting, Novasel garnered 27.46 percent of the vote (1,135 votes), Brown 19.06 percent (788), Angela Swanson 17.83 percent (737), Kenny Curtzwiler 17.68 percent (731), Gerri Grego 12.07 percent (499), and Teresa Piper 5.68 percent (235).

Either Kevin Brown or Sue Novasel will be the next District 5 supervisor.

Certification of the vote usually takes about a month so provisional ballots can be counted, which means the numbers are unofficial at this point and could change.

Norma Santiago was termed out, thus creating the opening.

"I want to say how honored I am to have our community's support. I will continue to work hard during this campaign for District V and I promise to be a strong voice for all of our communities throughout the district," Novasel told *Lake Tahoe News*.

She and her husband were out until after midnight picking up campaign signs.

Brown said Novasel was one of the two people he thought he might be facing five months from now.

One thing he is alarmed about is the low voter turnout in this particular race compared to other races in the county. Getting people to the polls, he said, will be a big goal in November.

"We did knock on doors. We made phone calls, but the money was scarce with six running for the spot," Brown told *Lake Tahoe News.*

This seat is no longer a Tahoe-only district. It now stretches to Pollock Pines, where Brown resides.

Novasel is a longtime Meyers resident.

One thing they have in common is both are school board members.

What remains to be seen is if Swanson will run for City Council to retain her seat on that body. Swanson said she would only speak through her campaign manager, but provided no contact information for him.

There will also be a runoff for the District 4 supervisorial seat. Howard Penn finished with 1,737 votes or 21.87 percent, while Michael Ranalli tallied 1,708 votes for 21.5 percent.

Paid parking opponents win in South Lake Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

Say goodbye to South Lake Tahoe's parking meters at Lakeview Commons and Lakeside Beach.

The voters on June 3 said take them out. This will happen after Labor Day.

With 100 percent of the precincts reporting, the yes votes were 1,271 at 68.41 percent and the no votes were 587 at 31.59 percent.

"I think the people have spoken very well; that they just don't like it," John Cefalu said of paid parking.

Cefalu was one of the main opponents to the meters and early leader to force the city's hand to change its policy.

"For the city to make the argument that this is a fundamental part of the budget and they need the revenue, I just can't buy it," Cefalu told *Lake Tahoe News.*

The city's latest paid parking program has not been welcome since the get-go. Meetings were often contentious, with name-calling and anger the norm instead of civility and compromise.

While a group called Tahoe 4 Tahoe secured enough signatures to take the question of paid parking to the voters, legally they could not do so because of how the Vehicle Code is written when it comes to parking meters. Had it gone to court the city would have likely won based on past rulings. In the end, though, the City Council decided it was better for the voters to decide and the city put the measure on the ballot.

"I just hope that the vitriol is over. We are getting a lot done in this town with marginal revenue," Mayor Hal Cole told *Lake Tahoe News*. "We need to all start pulling in the same direction moving forward. A lot more investment is needed."

The decision does not affect the parking garage at Heavenly Village or the meters on Bellamy Court.

"It means we have to find a way to plug a hole that the lost revenue will create. We will be discussing that at the next council meeting," City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Sullivan, Ashworth elected to

judgeships

By Susan Wood

The women running for the two judgeships in El Dorado County will join presiding Judge Suzanne Kingsbury in what will be a slightly more gender balanced Superior Court.

Superior Court Commissioner Dylan Sullivan and Deputy District Attorney Vicki Ashworth won judgeship offices 5 and 1, respectively, in the June 3 primary election – both with resounding turnouts in their favor. Sullivan received 18,124 votes or 59.99 percent against attorney Joe Hoffman. Ashworth pulled in 15,841 votes at 51.5 percent to beat business owners David Combellack and Joe Weinberger.

Dylan Sullivan, right, receives support election night from El Dorado County Superior Court Judge Suzanne Kingsbury. Photo/Wendy David

Sullivan seemed humbled by the win – declaring hard work, perseverance and strong familial influences as leading her to the office. She was the oldest of three children born to a teenage mother and knew she'd have to work hard, be strong and take responsibility to mold her path to success.

"My mother instilled that in me," she told *Lake Tahoe News*.

They were the only two college graduates in the family.

She pledged to continue the diligent work ethic, find fair resolutions and truly listen to people, much like she attempted to do in the campaign. She even talked about listening as if it were a lost art.

“That was the most effective part of my campaign – to really talk to them and go to the public forums. I think that’s an important part of being on the bench,” she said, during a break at her celebration with about two dozen people in a suite at MontBleu on Tuesday night.

Sullivan acknowledged Judge Kingsbury as yet another strong role model who helped “create an environment for me to succeed.”

Sullivan mentioned pounding the pavement as the most interesting component to the campaign because of the residents’ surprised reactions.

“I felt it’s the least I could do. My one regret is that there was no way I could make it to every voter,” she said.

Ashworth had a similar experience in her door-to-door interactions with voters.

“Most people don’t expect that,” she said, while driving home after her gathering.

But then again, anything’s possible in El Dorado County. She was pleasantly surprised by so many people showing up at the public forums during the campaign season. She even attributes much of her success in her win as “voters educating themselves and being involved.”

Ashworth has long learned how to balance being a conscientious observer, capable of a proactive bent. Meaning, she’s a doer, which her record prosecuting high-profile cases proves, but has watched others such as longtime Judge Eddie Keller in action on the bench which has taught her another aspect of the law.

A judgeship isn't necessarily a lifelong dream — but a recent quest.

"It's been (there) since the children were getting older," she said.

And so it goes, the balance of family and work.

She promises El Dorado County she'll be "fair and impartial."

Drought brings gold prospectors back to life

By Scott Gold, Los Angeles Times

David Fiori, waist-deep in the chilly Kern River, braced against the current, stabbed a shovel into the ancient silt between his feet and tossed the muck downstream. His eyes, though, wandered to a potential prize — a spot on the opposite bank of the river.

To the uninitiated, it looked like just another leafy bend in the 165-mile-long Kern, which carries the snowmelt of the Sierra Nevada toward the sea. But prospectors have had a different sort of perspective in this stretch of California for a long time.

On the other side of the river, Fiori noted, the crystalline water roiled and turned white because it splashed over a cluster of underwater boulders. It's the sort of geological quirk that abruptly slows the current, causing heavier elements to settle into the muck of the riverbed — namely, gold.

Read the whole story

Low jobless rate for community college graduates

By David Leonhardt, New York Times

The federal government's main educational-attainment categories are fairly blunt. In particular, the "some college" category includes a wide array of people: Those who have dropped out of college without earning any degree, those who have earned a two-year degree meant to lead directly to a job (such as in nursing) and those who have earned an academic two-year degree that is often a first step toward a bachelor's degree.

If you want to understand how successful community colleges are, to take just one example, you need to know how well someone with a two-year degree fares in the job market.

Fortunately, in a series of tables that aren't on its website but are available upon request, the Bureau of Labor Statistics does distinguish among the different versions of "some college." (It would be even better if the bureau made this data easily available to the public.)

The group with the highest jobless rate, not surprisingly, is people who have attended some college classes without earning any degree. Their jobless rate is only slightly lower than that of high school graduates who have never attended college.

Read the whole story