

Solar desalination may be answer to water woes

By Peter Kelly-Detwiler, Forbes

Aaron Mandell, founder and chairman of WaterFX, looks at California's water issue like a classic entrepreneur. Where others see problems, he sees opportunity for improvement and profit. And that opportunity is huge.

It is common knowledge that access to clean water is a mounting problem across the globe. However, few places have water issues as complex and challenging as California, which has been dealing with the water issue for generations (some may remember the 1974 Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway film "Chinatown" that focused on the California water wars of the early 1900s). In California, the issue is highly complex, layered in a complicated history of rights, claimants, and the physical reality of too much demand for a limited supply. Water issues are also inextricably linked to energy issues: it takes an enormous amount of energy to pump, treat, and move water. So the water problem is not only limited to H₂O, it's a costly energy issue as well.

Mandell hopes to change that reality. He has a vision for how to make that happen, starting with a clean and modular technology and an open source approach that he hopes will stimulate a growing community of solutions providers. His company, WaterFX, has created a solar-powered desalination system to treat agricultural drainage that is not only benign from an energy standpoint, but also leaves the agricultural environment in better shape.

[Read the whole story](#)

Donner Lake State Park captures its history



Donner Lake is uninviting on the lone stormy day of January.
Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

TRUCKEE – A park named after the Donner party should be visited in inclement weather. It's the best way to get a feel for what the 81-member wagon train went through in the winter of 1846-47.

While such weather has been scarce this winter, we ventured out in some last Saturday. Wind was blowing. The temperature was dropping. A mix of rain and snow drenched us. We were not

as unprepared as the Donner party, which lost 36 people on the trek across the Sierra, but we certainly weren't ready for the elements.

For some reason we pushed on.



A soggy Sue treks through Donner State Park on Jan. 11.

Being at the ocean on a stormy day is something I've always enjoyed. This was a bit like that. While the waves were nowhere near ocean-like, they were strong enough to appreciate the force of Mother Nature.

Donner Memorial State Park does not have many places to hike, but there is a 2½-mile roundtrip interpretive trail that is in large part along the lake.

We were happy to have our Yak Tracks on to contend with the ice on the trail.

With all the rocks, it appears Donner Lake is low like all the other lakes in the state. Interestingly, one of the interpretive signs talks about the seven-year drought that started in 1987. The frail lodgepole could not defend against the mountain pine beetle that thrived in the drought-weakened trees. Strong winds in winter 1994-95 blew many of the diseased trees to the ground.

While this area is known for the deadly, cannibalistic wagon train, it is also home to part of the original interstate system. Before Interstate 80 there was Highway 40. Signs are still in the area depicting Old Highway 40.



The day use area has great views, including to the towering (invisible on this day) granite wall where the railroad is.

But before that for a short time it was Highway 37. It was part of the 3,000-mile Lincoln Highway that went from coast-to-coast.

Before automobiles, though, there was the train. On this particular day it was too overcast to see up to the tracks. Those who ski Sugar Bowl know the name Judah. Theodore Judah was an engineer who surveyed the first transcontinental railroad.

It was Charles Crocker, Mark Hopkins, Leland Stanford and Collis P. Huntington who formed the Central Pacific Railroad Company. Mostly it was Chinese who in two years built the tracks through the Sierra for these barons of industry who capitalized off of what amounted to slave labor.

To this day Truckee has a train depot that takes travelers to points east and west.

The natural beauty and intriguing history make the lake and park a multi-dimensional visit – no matter the weather or season.

Notes:

- Getting there: From Lake Tahoe head west on Interstate 80. Take the Donner Pass Road exit. (There is a sign saying Donner State Park.) Go left at the stop sign. The park is on the left. It costs \$8 to park or there is free parking on the road. If entering off the road, you'll see a sign that says "East Beach access" – veer left for the trail, right for the beach.
- Dogs are allowed on leash.
- A new museum – High Sierra Crossing Museum – at the park is expected to open later this year.

Snowmaking saving Lake Tahoe's ski season

By Lisa M. Krieger, San Jose Mercury News

These are the unlikely saviors in the lofty peaks of the serene Sierra: high-tech snow machines, roaring like jets and spewing million-dollar crystals.

"If it wasn't for snowmaking, we probably wouldn't be open," said Barrett Burghard, head snowmaker at Heavenly Mountain

Resort, who is propping up the beleaguered mountain economy with his vast computer-driven complex of snow guns, pumps, compressors, pipes, hydrants, nozzles and miles of hoses.

Mother Nature, always fickle, has been especially cruel this drought year to the resorts and mountain communities that depend on snow for their economic survival. Instead of fluffy powder, there's just granite, mud and manzanita.

Innovations in technology – such as the \$40,000 Super PoleCat, with a built-in automated weather station that alters man-made snow characteristics – make it possible to produce an acre of thigh-deep snow in an hour. That's enough to blanket a football field with snow 8 feet deep during a three-hour game.

In this dry and balmy winter, the small, historic and family-owned resorts without extensive snow making – such as Donner Ski Ranch or Dodge Ridge – haven't opened, costing jobs and starving local businesses. The National Winter Trail Days event at Tahoe Donner Cross Country Ski and Snowshoe Center was canceled. But big corporations running Heavenly, Northstar, Kirkwood, Squaw Valley, Alpine Meadows and Mammoth Mountain have made major investments in snow-making tools. Squaw Valley alone has spent \$5.2 million since 2012. This month virtually all of the snow at the resorts came out of machines.

Read the whole story

Bettors: 49ers are Super Bowl

bound

By Case Keefer, Las Vegas Sun

The 49ers are channeling their namesake in Las Vegas.

San Francisco is inciting a sports-book gold rush in the form of betting slips. Coach Jim Harbaugh's squad was the most gambled-on team of the weekend in each of their first two playoff games as slight favorites against the Green Bay Packers and Carolina Panthers.

Nothing has changed now that they're taking points, three or 3.5 depending on the shop, on the road against the Seahawks in Sunday's NFC Championship Game.

While bookmakers would take a hit if the 49ers won in Seattle for the first time since 2011, it might be worthwhile considering the Super Bowl implications. San Francisco's presence in the game Feb. 2 at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J., would boost Super Bowl betting volume up to 8 percent, according to Vaccaro. Last year's record of \$98.9 million wagered statewide on the Super Bowl would find itself in imminent danger.

Read the whole story

Douglas County students might be able to take college

classes during regular school day

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Douglas County School District is considering partnering with Western Nevada College in an expanded dual credit program.

High school students can take WNC classes now, but it has to be after school or in the evenings. The program the district is looking at would be during the regular school day, be just Douglas and/or Whittell high school students, be taught at the Douglas campus of WNC, and include a peer mentor-teacher's assistant in the room who would be provided by WNC.

It could start in the fall with English 101 and Math 126 and then English 102 and Math 127 in spring 2015.

The board unanimously agreed at its meeting Jan. 14 to have Superintendent Lisa Noonan pursue the idea and come back with more specifics, like cost, what to do if students can't afford the class, transportation, opportunities for Whittell students, the fairness of limiting the number of students allowed to enroll and other details.

To take the English and math classes at WNC it costs \$555 a semester. If 25 students were to take the two courses both semesters the cost is \$28,500.

Districts in Nevada are not uniform in how they handle the costs for high school student-community college programs. Some pay it all, some charge the same \$90 fee as an AP class, some provide transportation.

One thing brought up this week is how students taking WNC classes today pay their way. But they are doing so on their

own time and don't get extra support.

The Jump Start College program is being offered by WNC to Carson, Churchill, Mineral and Storey county school districts, too. Those classes would be at the Carson City campus.

John Kinkella, dean of student service at WNC, gave a presentation to the Douglas board Tuesday outlining the benefits:

- The student completes math and English general education college course requirements while still in high school.
- The parent is assured of a supportive initial college experience and a break on tuition and fee costs compared to the university.
- Jump Start College students add to the high school and school district's new performance measures.

"Completions of English 101 is the highest prediction of completing their bachelor's," Kinkella said.

Whittell, with its being on a four-day schedule and having a tiny student body, may present challenges that could not be overcome when it comes to college classes during the regular school day.

Whittell Principal Crespin Esquivel asked about the possibility of distance learning for his students. This will be investigated.

"Overall, I think it's wonderful for kids," Esquivel told the board.

In fall 2008, Whittell had an agreement with WNC. Whittell teachers taught WNC classes in addition to their regular five periods. One was a section of composition and one of trig/pre-calculus.

Whittell students also used to go to Lake Tahoe Community College on a regular basis. When Nevada did away with the good neighbor policy it meant students in Nevada had to pay out of state tuition even though it's the closest college to them.

LTCC President Kindred Murillo has been working to change that policy.

"We are working on a different strategy. We may kill SB329 and develop a new bill that may be more to the liking of the Senate Education Committee. We are working currently with the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office and the Community College League of California to strategize the best approach," Murillo told *Lake Tahoe News*. "We are not giving up, just trying to find a way to make it beneficial to everyone."

Stockton school shooting leaves impact 25 years later

By Josh Richman and Mark Emmons, San Jose Mercury News

STOCKTON – The graves of the children buried here long ago in the cold January ground are about a mile from Cleveland Elementary School. But except for the passing cars, chirping birds and the occasional freight train rumbling nearby, the resting place is mostly silent.

Twenty-five years ago today, Cleveland Elementary was the scene of one of the nation's worst school shootings – years before Columbine, Virginia Tech and Newtown. Former South Lake Tahoe resident Patrick Edward Purdy's three-minute shooting rampage left five children dead and 30 teachers and students

wounded. All but one of those killed were offspring of Cambodian refugees who had survived the murderous Khmer Rouge.

“This just doesn’t ever go away. I think that’s something the outside world just doesn’t get,” said Judy Weldon, 65, a retired teacher who tended to the wounded that day. “Yes, we all grow and move on and change. But we never, ever forget.”

The scars aren’t just emotional. Rob Young, then a first-grader, still carries a bullet fragment in his chest after being shot twice. The shooting, he said, “will forever be a part of me.”

But amid a renewed national gun debate reignited by an even deadlier school massacre 13 months ago in Connecticut, those who survived Stockton’s horror can add an epilogue to Purdy’s deadly lesson: Painful memories never go away but don’t necessarily define the course of people’s lives.

Read the whole story

It’s official – California is in a drought



Cold overnight temps keep

Taylor Creek frozen, but
there is no snow along the
banks. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Josh Richman and Paul Rogers, San Jose Mercury News

SAN FRANCISCO – Gov. Jerry Brown on Friday officially declared that California is in a drought emergency, as the state struggled with the lowest-levels of rainfall in its 153-year history, reservoirs were at low levels and firefighters remained on high alert.

The governor asked Californians to reduce their water consumption by 20 percent. In practical terms, the drought declaration streamlines the rules for water agencies to transfer extra water from one part of the state to another. It also raises public awareness.

Brown was governor in 1976 and 1977, one of the most severe dry periods in the 20th century. The most recent extended drought was 1987-1992. The last governor to declare a drought declaration was Arnold Schwarzenegger, who did so during a period of low rainfall in 2008 and 2009. Brown lifted that declaration in 2011 after a wet winter.

The Sierra Nevada snowpack on Thursday was 17 percent of normal. Last year, most cities in the state received the lowest amount of rain in any living person's lifetime – with records going back to 1850.

Read the whole story

No plastic – no problem in South Lake Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe residents are coping with less plastic – at least for now.

Grocery stores in the city had to stop providing single-use plastic bags to customers starting Jan. 15 per an ordinance that was approved last fall. Other stores and restaurants in town must comply with the ordinance beginning Oct. 15.

The city is one of more than 80 in the state that has banned the disposable bags. Los Angeles did the same earlier this month. It is estimated that more than 100 billion of these bags are used in the United States each year. Opponents to them cite environmental degradation even though it requires more energy to produce and deliver paper bags. *Time* magazine recently said, “One study found that a cotton tote must be used at least 131 times to be better for the planet than plastic.”

Grocery Outlet used to only have those single-use bags available. Not anymore. Now a thicker reusable plastic bag is available for 10 cents, paper for 5 cents or a thicker bag with the store’s name on it for 99 cents. About 1,000 of the logo bags have been given away by the store in the last few weeks.



Grocery Outlet provides a gentle reminder for those who left reusable bags in their vehicle. Photo/LTN

Mike Schouten, owner of the local Grocery Outlet, said about 75 percent of the people coming in were aware of the ban. He added that for the most part everyone was fine with not having the former plastic bags available.

Mariena Esposito had no bags when she left the store. As she was placing the individual items from her cart into her vehicle she admitted she forgets to bring her reusable bags with her.

Esposito is hearing older people who are more set in their ways are upset with the ban. One man leaving the store pointed to his Grocery Outlet bag in his cart and said, "It's ridiculous man. You have to pay for that, too."

At Safeway, Mark McCarthy opted for the free paper bag. But that's not his first choice.

"I need the plastic bags for recycling. I guess I'll have to get Glad Hefty bags," McCarthy said.

"There are dozens of cities and counties with various versions of a bag ban. We see these as very positive. We are certainly concerned about protecting our environment and reducing the number of single-use bags in the waste stream," Keith Turner, director of public and governmental affairs for Safeway, told

Lake Tahoe News. "We anticipate that the change will go smoothly, as employees are versed on the new rules."

Safeway has logo bags for sale for \$1.49. Those with a store discount card can get one free until Jan. 31 for every \$25 that is spent. There is a three-bag limit on freebies.

Cindy Littell had her goods in one of those bags. It will add to the collection of more than a half dozen she has at home. She's glad the town has caught up with other areas that ban bags.

"It's a good thing. (Bags) will still be there (decomposing) when I'm long dead and gone," Jeff Garvin said as he was leaving Raley's at the Y.

Raley's was giving out logo bags to the first 500 customers on Wednesday. Otherwise they are 99 cents. A little more heavy-duty ones sell for \$1.99. Paper bags are 5 cents.

Lead clerk April Kirkhuff told *Lake Tahoe News* about 35 percent of customers already use reusable bags.

Asked if she thought it would be more of a problem with tourists who may not have read about the ban, especially with this being a three-day weekend, she said, "I think tourists will pay the 5 cents and not really think twice about it. If they have enough money to go on vacation in Tahoe, 5 cents isn't anything."

While the stores are complying with the law, the city is not putting any effort into enforcing it.

"The city has no staff assigned for code enforcement on this issue," City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*. "The council gave clear direction they were not interested in taking coercive methods with compliance. They wanted a friendly approach."

El Dorado County slow-growth initiative launched

By Tony Bizjak, Sacramento Bee

Saying El Dorado County is growing too fast and Highway 50 is getting jammed, a group of activists launched a drive Tuesday to qualify a November ballot measure that would slow growth while encouraging the county to work harder to bring jobs to the area.

Petitioners hope to qualify their measure, called "Fix Highway 50 Traffic First/Keep Us Rural," for the November ballot. It would be the second major grass-roots efforts in recent years to slow development in the lower reaches of the foothills county, where tens of thousands of commuters flow daily onto Highway 50, many bound for jobs in Sacramento County.

If passed, the measure would amend the county General Plan to prohibit the county from approving any more residential subdivisions of five or more parcels until overall traffic congestion is improved on Highway 50 from the current "level of service" F, or stop-and-go during commute periods.

Read the whole story

Politicians' private emails

not always private

By Jack Gillum, AP

WASHINGTON — Personal emails at the center of the brewing scandal for New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie may have remained secret, had the public and press relied solely on the state's open records law.

Emails disclosed this past week show a top Christie aide asking the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to shut down three lanes on the busy George Washington Bridge, resulting in major backups for days last September. Those emails were leaked to reporters last week, even though one newspaper requested them nearly a month ago, only to be told they didn't exist.

The use of private emails adds Christie, a possible Republican presidential candidate in 2016, to a growing list of administrations that use private email accounts and other digital services to conduct official business. In turn, state and federal officials, regardless of political party, have sidestepped public records laws meant to keep government activities transparent.

The Record of Bergen, N.J., said it filed an open-records request last month asking for emails related to the Port Authority's decision to close the bridge lanes. The request specifically sought emails between David Wildstein, a Christie-appointed Port Authority official, and employees in the governor's office.

The newspaper received a response from Christie's office 10 days later, stating that the office "reviewed its records" but did not find any responsive emails. Weeks later, however, emails similar to what the *Record* asked for were made public after being obtained under subpoena by state Assembly Democrats.

It's unclear why the governor's office didn't turn over apparently responsive emails from the Yahoo Mail account of Christie's former deputy chief of staff, Bridget Anne Kelly. She used the service to send messages to Wildstein, who ordered the bridge lanes closed. Representatives in Christie's office did not immediately return messages seeking comment Friday.

Public records laws, which can vary widely from state to state, govern how officials' documents and correspondence should be stored and released. But those laws largely have been slow to catch up to the digital age.

The result creates a gray area for how state and federal employees can use electronic services, such as personal email accounts and phone text messages, to conduct their business. It also creates murkiness for how those records should be disclosed to an inquisitive public.

For instance, the Associated Press found last year that some of President Obama's political appointees, including Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, used secret, unpublished email accounts at work. Officials said the emails are still searchable under the federal Freedom of Information Act, although the AP was unable to confirm that practice.

Christie's Democratic predecessor, Jon Corzine, had fought to keep secret emails he exchanged with his ex-girlfriend, a former union leader. The state's highest court ruled in 2009 he could keep those messages private.

Across the Hudson River, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo responded to a month-old AP request under the state's Freedom of Information Law by saying the governor has never written an email — state or personal — for public business. Instead, he uses an untraceable Blackberry message system.

Cuomo, a Democrat, later called it a way to prevent hacking. His office didn't immediately reply when asked Friday if he

still uses that approach.

Across the nation, judges have been left to interpret how nascent technology fits into public records laws, often written before the dawn of the Internet.

In October 2012, the Alaska Supreme Court said state employees can use private emails, but that they must be preserved under records laws. The decision stemmed from the practice of former Gov. Sarah Palin's use of private emails in government. When Palin was the Republican vice presidential nominee in 2008, journalists fought for and received thousands of personal emails she initially claimed were exempt from disclosure.

During the 2012 presidential campaign, GOP nominee Mitt Romney confirmed news reports that when he stepped down as Massachusetts governor in 2007, he authorized top aides to buy and remove computer hard drives containing key data about his administration. The AP submitted a records request for his emails, but learned Romney and top aides had used private email accounts to conduct state business during his stint as governor.

Massachusetts officials said any Romney administration private emails used for state business belonged in Massachusetts archives. But Romney campaign officials refused to make the material public, citing a state court ruling that said Massachusetts governors retained full access over administration records.

The highest court in Arizona, a state with comparably expansive public records laws, said only private emails that have a "substantial nexus" with government activity can be released to the public. That stemmed from the *Arizona Republic* newspaper's 2005 request for emails from a county official who later went to prison for felony theft and fraud.

New Jersey law says officials can be disciplined and fined up to \$5,000 for violating the open-records act, and that

agencies have to reimburse a requestor's attorney fees if the state loses an open-records lawsuit.

Associated Press writers Stephen Braun in Washington and Michael Virtanen in Albany, N.Y., contributed to this report.