Legal pot in Calif. brings host of environmental rules

By Ellen Knickmeyer, AP

At a state briefing on environmental rules that await growers entering California's soon-to-be-legal marijuana trade, organic farmers Ulysses Anthony, Tracy Sullivan and Adam Mernit listened intently, eager to make their humble cannabis plot a model of sustainable agriculture in a notoriously destructive industry dominated by the black market.

In line with a 2017 study that found marijuana grows are more damaging, plot for plot, than commercial logging in Northern California forests, Anthony said he has seen too many destructive grows. Trash-strewn clearings. Growers heaping fertilizer at the foot of a centuries-old sequoia tree, needlessly endangering it. Wild streams diverted for irrigation.

"It really bothers me when I see some of the other operations, the treatment of the land," he said.

Read the whole story

Temperature changes challenge Tahoe's wildlife

By Jim Sloan

The pika is a small, furry mammal that lives in the harshest of places – in mountainous rocky areas where the snow is deep, the air is cold, and conditions are unforgiving.

The small-eared member of the rabbit family doesn’t even hibernate, choosing instead to burrow into hay piles it builds beneath the deep snow and using its high metabolism and thick fur to survive.

But now the American pika is disappearing from vast stretches of the backcountry because of a new enemy: climate change.

A 6-inch mammal that can survive for months beneath massive snowpacks is disappearing in the face of increasingly hot summertime temperatures.

In a study published earlier this year in the journal PLOS One, researchers found that the pika has vanished from the rugged backcountry around Mount Pluto bounded by Lake Tahoe, Highway 89, and Highway 267.

It is the largest area of pika extinction reported in the modern era. Researchers said the extent of the die-off echoed “large-scale range collapses” that occurred after the last Ice Age.

From 2011 to 2016, lead researcher Joseph Stewart, a conservation biologist at UC Santa Cruz, scoured that triangle of land looking for pikas. He found plenty of old pika scat and used carbon dating to show how long the animal had occupied the area, but all signs of living pikas had disappeared.

“We knew that historically they occupied habitat all through that area,” Stewart said. “But the living animals were no longer there.”

Stewart says the pikas died out first in the lower elevations and then in the higher reaches of the 165-square-kilometer area because of increasingly hot summer temperatures. Pikas are sensitive to the heat; they can only survive for an hour in temperatures that are above 75 degrees. When the daytime temperatures are too high, pikas can't get out and forage or die trying.

Although some pikas survive in other parts of the Sierra, Stewart predicts that their numbers will decline by 97 percent by 2050. Other studies have shown that the pika has disappeared from the Black Rock Range in Nevada and from Zion National Park.

And the American pika is not the only victim of climate change. Stewart noted that Belding's ground squirrel and the alpine chipmunk are also suffering in the heat. The pika has disappeared from 15 percent of its historical habitat, but the Belding's ground squirrel – which lives above 6,500 feet elevation between Lake Tahoe and Kings Canyon – is gone from 42 percent of its historic stomping grounds.

More troubling, Stewart says, is that many more species may be disappearing but wildlife managers are having trouble documenting the decline due to a lack of funds for monitoring.

"For these species that are vulnerable, we need baseline data on where they are now," he said. "It's totally feasible to develop that knowledge. We just need to put money toward the effort."

The news of Stewart's findings about the pika triggered a wave of media reports. *Discover* magazine, the *New York Times*, and many local and regional newspapers reported his findings. Stewart was surprised – this was his third paper on the topic – but hopes the public interest will convince people to help reverse global warming.

"It's one thing to hear about polar bears suffering because of climate change, but when you hear about an animal that is much closer to you and that you have seen on hikes or trips into the mountains, it tends to resonate more," he said.

Stewart notes other studies that show climate-related local extinctions have already occurred in hundreds of species around the world. A recent study that surveyed 976 species from tropical to marine habitats found that nearly half have suffered local extinctions.

Stewart says one hope for slowing the loss of species is to use targeted gene flow, in which animals from warm-adapted populations of a species are translocated to populations that don’t yet possess these genetic adaptations to withstand warmer climate conditions.

“But a far simpler and more economical solution than trying to save each species individually is to rein in and reverse climate change,” he said.

This article is republished from the winter 2017 edition of ***Tahoe In Depth****.*

Who to watch in the 2018 Winter Olympics

Mikaela Shiffrin is a favorite for the women in alpine skiing. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

By Jennifer Calfas, Time

From a 17-year-old snowboarding star to a gold-medal-hungry women's ice hockey team, Team USA's athletes competing in the 2018 Winter Olympic Games in PyeongChang, South Korea, are looking to make a mark.

The official roster for Team USA will not be finalized until weeks before the 2018 Winter Olympics start Feb. 9, but the first competitors in the 15 Winter Olympic sports have already been chosen — and they each bring a unique story to the games.

Maame Biney is a 17-year-old who already made history as the first black woman to qualify for Team USA's short track speedskating team. Making his return in 2018, Gus Kenworthy is a freestyle skiing star who could become the first openly gay male athlete to compete at a Winter Games. And Chloe Kim is a 17-year-old snowboarding phenom who is the favorite to win gold in the sport for Team USA.

Read the whole story

Americans are using a lot less water

By Story Hinckley, Christian Science Monitor

The average American is using a lot less water on a daily basis. Six gallons less, to be exact.

The US Geological Survey's National Water Use Science Project has estimated water use in the United States every five years since 1950. In its most recent estimate published this fall, the USGS found that American daily water use per capita went from 88 gallons in 2010 to 82 gallons per capita in 2015.

Conservation of fresh water is important because it is a limited resource: Less than 1 percent of all the water on Earth can by used by humans. With growing populations and changing climates, fresh water is becoming increasingly valuable, says Edward Osann, a senior policy analyst and water efficiency project director at the National Resources Defense Council.

Read the whole story

S. Lake Tahoe ending retiree health care benefits

By Kathryn Reed

Retirees are no longer going to be a drain on the taxpayers of South Lake Tahoe – at least when it comes to their health benefits.

The obligation of retiree health care benefits goes away a year from New Year's Day.

This is the outcome of a protracted effort by City Manager Nancy Kerry to rein in debt, the City Council's desire to stop paying for benefits to retirees and their dependents for decades past their service, and the retirees agreeing to settle a **lawsuit from December 2015**.

Joe Rose, attorney with Rose Law in Sacramento who had represented the retirees, was not available for comment.

The deal affects more than 140 retirees.

For years South Lake Tahoe has been the only public entity in the Lake Tahoe Basin to offer retirees medical coverage.

South Lake Tahoe has always been self-insured, which means it pays all the medical bills incurred by those covered in the plan. About $4 million is spent on health care by the city each year.

"So this year we will look for medical insurance because (the retirees) won't be on there. So, the city could get out of the business of paying medical bills," City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*. "We took 50 years of obligation off the locals."

Several years ago the city created an OPEB – other postemployment benefits — account to help deal with the rising unfunded debt obligations. Kerry a handful of years ago offered to split the nearly $7 million pot of cash among all the retirees in exchange for them to forfeit future health care benefits. Some took it, others sued.

The deal reached this month, which the City Council is expected to sign off on in January, calls for the remainder of that pot of cash to be split equitably. In addition, those younger than 65 will get $12,000 and those 65 and older will get $6,000 each in 2019 and 2020. This money equals what the city had allocated for retiree medical care. They remain on the plan for 2018.

“Everyone gets a varied piece of the pie related to years of service and years to Medicare,” Kerry explained.

Retirees haven’t always had health benefits. Decades ago one got sick, needing some help. The city let him on the plan. This set the precedent and the flood gates were opened.

Through the years it became common practice that the retirees would get whatever health plan the employees agreed to.

It got to the point that retirees and their dependents outnumbered actual staff on the health plan. The people paying that bill were taxpayers. For that contribution locals got fewer services, including roads not being repaired, hours cut at the recreation center and fewer employees to help them. About a decade ago city staff was slashed by one-third. There were a lot of contributing factors, with millions of dollars in retiree medical benefits being one component.

At one point South Lake Tahoe’s unfunded liability for health care was $55 million.

A broker works with the city to decide what is in the health plan. For 20 years, costs were cut by deciding what would no longer be covered.

In 2007, the first substantive change was made under City Manager Dave Jinkens' watch. Anyone hired after Jan. 1, 2008, would not be given health benefits when they retired. But this made it so two people doing the same job were compensated in different ways.

In 2014, the council approved Kerry's plan to radically change health care. The main outcome was that all the employee groups agreed to give up their retiree health care effective Oct. 1, 2014.

These changes brought the unfunded liability to about $20 million.

This change put all employees on a level playing field.

Another hurdle for the city is to deal with CalPERS – the retiree pension system that has a noose around municipalities, with the Legislature holding the rope.

EDC taxpayers pay twice for same roadwork

Tahoma roads disintegrated from a bad chip seal project. Photo/El Dorado County

By Kathryn Reed

The botched roadwork in Tahoma in 2015 ended up costing El Dorado County thousands of dollars.

Normally government agencies deny claims when they are submitted. Not so with this case.

“These are unique claims in which the allegation of negligent application of emulsion and chips by county forces created an exposure to liability. While the county denies such negligence, there has not been a satisfactory answer to the question of what went wrong with the chip seal,” Carla Hass, spokeswoman for El Dorado County, told *Lake Tahoe News.* “There is no ‘general rule’ rather, all claims are evaluated on their own merits according to the facts and the law.”

Payment on the claims involving this case were at least in part all paid. That is unusual.

Based on numbers supplied by the county, from Nov. 1, 2011, to Oct. 31, 2017, there were 23 road surface condition claims throughout the county. Of those, 23.5 percent were paid; an average of less than three per year. These were road surface condition claims.

As for the Tahoma case, “13 claims have been filed. No claims have been denied; $41,860.05 in claims have been filed, $19,285.84 have been paid,” Hass said. She did not explain the discrepancy between the amount requested and the amount paid.

Western Emulsions was contracted to use a chip seal on about 21 miles of roadway on the West Shore. The following winter it started to deteriorate, especially with snow removal. The sticky oil surfaced. That is what caused much of the damage to personal vehicles and why the claims started being submitted.

Lake Tahoe News nearly two months ago requested all written communications between the county and the emulsion company. The county has refused to provide those documents.

“There is no evidence that the failure of the project performed in August 2015 was the result of negligence on the part of the county or its employees,” Hass said. However, taxpayers were still left with part of the bill from the subpar work.

Western Emulsions, per the settlement agreement with the county, was to pay $8,977.60 for the residents’ claims – so, not even half.

The settlement agreement said to fix the mess it would cost $383,900. Of that amount, Western Emulsion was liable for $271,920. So, the county ended up in part paying twice for the same job and then for part of the claims to appease vehicle owners even though the county spokeswoman says the county was not negligent.

In the end, it meant less money for road repairs in other parts of the county.

The settlements states, “This agreement or any payment made pursuant to it, is not and may not be construed as an admission of liability, fault or responsibility by the parties.” Parties refers to the county and the contractor.

California suffering unusually dry winter

By Rong-gong Lin II, Los Angeles Times

California's dismally dry autumn paints a bleak outlook for the state's rainy season, unless the weather this winter makes a big about-face.

The situation is a major turnaround from last year, when Northern California was battered by a series of "atmospheric river" storms that helped end the state's five-year drought. When it was over, California's northern Sierra Nevada experienced the wettest winter on record, with some ski resorts staying open through the summer.

The dry conditions are partly to blame for the worst fire season on record in California. Low humidity and lack of rain coupled with high winds fueled destructive wildfires from Mendocino down to San Diego this fall. In wine country, more than 40 people died and more than 10,000 homes were lost. To the south, the Thomas fire in Ventura and Santa Barbara counties became the largest wildfire on record in California.

Read the whole story

Lawsuit alleges price fixing by snow removal firms

By Kathryn Reed

Thousands of Tahoe Donner residents could have been the victims of a price fixing scheme involving two snow removal companies in Truckee.

A lawsuit was filed in Nevada County Superior Court last week against Elements Mountain Company – Jamie LeGare – formerly known as Jamie Waltman, Joanne Waltman and Matthew Warren.

Ten counts have been listed in the suit. Allegations are that from 2008-17, Snowtech and Waltman companies were in collusion regarding how much they would charge people for snow removal in the Truckee subdivision. In March 2017, the companies merged and became Elements Mountain. The individuals named above worked for the companies.

"I think this case is quite straight forward and more so than most price fixing cases I've been involved in," Stuart Gross with the Gross & Klein law firm in San Francisco told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Fundamentally this case is about ensuring basic principles that govern fair competition are protected."

No one from Elements Mountain Company returned a phone call.

Michael Cramer and Brian Paddock are the named plaintiffs in this class-action lawsuit. Between 5,000 and 7,000 people in this housing development may have been victims during the time span stated. The lawsuit alleges the infractions occurred from April 2010-March 13, 2017.

Included in the court documents are emails between the individual companies.

In an email dated April 26, 2010, Warren who was the principal at Snowtech and became the new company's secretary, wrote, "In the interest of placating homeowners on pricing, we'd be willing to take a $30 price increase if you took a $25 price increase. This gives the perception that there is a little bit of competitive pricing happening in TD. We will still maintain our Price Guarantee policy." This was sent to Jamie Waltman, who was the president of Waltman and is president of the merged company.

The lawsuit contends that starting in 2011 the defendants met in person to decide on the prices.

"When the agreed pricing and services were memorialized in a bullet-point list, the list would be destroyed after being used for this purpose," the lawsuit alleges.

The two companies are also accused of keeping out competition, which further allowed them to set prices. Those prices are alleged to be much higher than other locations in the greater Truckee-Tahoe area.

"In some ways price fixing is quite simple. This case is a good example of that. We have explicit agreements between these two competitors to fix the minimum price and then how to calculate it for other customers," Gross said.

The lawsuit claims violation of the Cartwright Act, which deals with fair competition; false advertising; breach of contract; intentional interference with the contract; unfair competition; and aiding and abetting.

The plaintiffs are seeking monetary damages—hoping to "recover compensatory, punitive, and threefold the damages determined to have been sustained by them as a result of the conduct of defendants," the suit states.

U.S. launches plan to battle rangeland wildfires

By Keith Ridler, AP

BOISE, Idaho — Federal officials have launched a two-pronged plan to stop a vicious cycle of rangeland wildfires in a wide swath of sagebrush country in the West that supports cattle ranching, recreation and is home to an imperiled bird.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management on Friday said it will create an environmental impact statement concerning fuel breaks and another on fuels reduction and restoration for Idaho, Oregon, Nevada, California, Utah, and Washington.

The agency said the documents when finished will help speed the process for future landscape-scale projects in the Great Basin by providing a blanket approval for similar areas that will likely just need minor additional environmental reviews to proceed.

Read the whole story

Travel industry has sparked a backlash against tourists

By Carter A. Hunt, The Conversation

Travel is a major global industry, but in 2017 it attracted unprecedented resentment and retaliation towards tourists. A growing global backlash against tourism extended from tropical rain forests to urban destinations like Rio de Janeiro and Venice.

I have studied tourism's social and environmental consequences along the coastlines of Colombia, Costa Rica and Nicaragua, in the rain forests of Peru and Ecuador, on the islands of Fiji and the Galapagos and across the savannahs of South Africa and Tanzania. My research and that of numerous other scholars spotlights a key fact: More tourism is not always better. Increasing the number of visitors has generated profits for travel companies – particularly the cruise ship industry – but it has not always benefited local communities and environments where tourism occurs.

Fortunately, once people are aware of the often surprising ways in which their trips impact local people and places, it becomes easy to ensure that their travel has more positive consequences for the destinations they visit.

Billions on the move

Born from the accessibility of mass air travel, modern international tourism has been popularized as "holiday-making" in regions that offer comparative advantages of sand, sun and sea. Travel is often portrayed as a tool for personal growth and tourism as an economic motor for destination countries and cities. There is a tendency to assume that tourism is good for everyone involved.

Today the big bang of tourism drives more than 1.2 billion tourists across international borders each year, generates 9 percent of global GDP and provides one out of every 11 jobs on earth. But many popular places are literally being loved to death. Recent protests in ports of call like Venice and Barcelona against disturbances created by larger and more numerous cruise ships show the unfortunate consequences of emphasizing quantity over quality in tourism.

Unabated tourism development has become a primary driver of social and environmental disruption. Tourism studies, which came of age as a scholarly field in the 1970s, provides much documentation of the many negative social impacts of tourism and resulting resentment that local populations direct towards visitors.

Early tourism scholars even developed an “irridex” to measure this irritation with tourists among local residents. Later, scholars identified stages through which tourist destinations evolve. Antagonism toward tourists typically develops in mature, heavily visited destinations. Protests in heavily visited destinations suggest that traditional tourism has overstayed its welcome.

Resentment toward tourists, attacks on foreign-owned hotels and increases in crime against both tourists and local residents were regularly documented in the 1970s and ‘80s, at a time when only 2 to 3 million tourists were crossing international borders annually. So it is not surprising that such protests have escalated in scale and frequency as tourism has grown.

In Barcelona, for example, growing resentment of neighborhood gentrification, elevated real estate and rental prices, and erosion of local social networks has led some residents to call tourism the city’s biggest problem and label tourists as “terrorists.”

Friends without benefits

Residents often become frustrated when the benefits of tourism are not felt locally. Although it can generate foreign exchange, income and employment, there is no guarantee that multinational hotel chains will allocate these benefits equitably among local communities.

On the contrary, when people stay at large resorts or on cruise ships, they make most of their purchases there, leaving local communities little opportunity to benefit from tourist spending. These forms of tourism widen economic and political gaps between haves and have-nots at local destinations.

In recent decades, local residents in destination communities also have found themselves negotiating new cultural boundaries, class dynamics, service industry roles and lifestyle transformations. For example, data show that tourism activity corresponds to increased alcohol, drug and sex abuse as local residents adopt the behaviors of tourists, often leading to parallel upticks in crime, addiction and prostitution.

All-inclusive resorts can also privatize access to important coastal, marine, forest and agricultural resources. And when foreign investment drives up local land values and living costs to international standards, it may put ownership out of reach for local residents. In such situations, even people who depend on tourism will often question its ethics, whether they are rural Nicaraguan residents working in a newly booming resort industry or urban dwellers being priced out of their apartments by the sharing economy.

Cruise lines miss the boat

Jim Damalas, owner of Si Como No ecolodge in Costa Rica, observes that publicly traded corporations do “not fall in love with the country, they fall in love with the numbers.” No form of tourism is more in love with the numbers than cruises. While all forms of tourism have grown in recent decades, the rise in cruise travel is dramatic. For instance, cruise visitors to Belize grew from 34,000 in 1999 to 800,000 in 2005.

Contemporary cruise ships can entertain as many as 5,700 passengers. These boats themselves are the destinations. As they bounce from port to port, they are not beholden to any particular community and provide only the most superficial levels of engagement with local people and places. Their business model emphasizes packing the greatest number of travelers into the greatest number of places in the shortest amount of time.

Research into the industry’s impact has shown that few forms of tourism do less to improve the social, environmental or economic well-being of the places where they occur than cruises. These trips may give passengers a pleasurable experience, but they miss the boat – pun intended – with regard to supporting local communities and environments.

A better model

The United Nations declared 2017 the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. What does this mean for the everyday traveler? Here are a few of the U.N.’s suggestions, which research on tourism supports.

First, as Stephen Colbert has quipped, “There’s nothing American tourists like more than the things they can get at home.” All tourists should make every effort to honor their hosts and respect local conditions. This means being prepared to adapt to local customs and norms, rather than expecting local conditions to adapt to travelers.

Second, tourism is a market-based activity and works best when consumers reward better performers. Livelihoods, human rights and the fate of endangered species all can be affected by travelers’ decisions. In the information age, there is little excuse for travelers being uninformed about where their vacation money goes and who it enriches.

Informed travelers also are better able to distinguish between multinational companies and local entrepreneurs whose businesses provide direct social, environmental, and economic benefits for local residents. Such businesses are in love with the destination, not just the numbers, and are therefore deserving of market reward.

In the long run, the goal should not be just to minimize the impact of travel. Being a responsible traveler means ensuring net positive impacts for local people and environments. With the amount of information available at our fingertips, there has never been more opportunity to do so.