Wildland fire burning near Sly Park

A fire near Sly Park off Highway 50 in El Dorado County had consumed about 35 acres as of Monday morning.

The Hazel Fired started the afternoon of Aug. 5, though no cause has been given.

The fire is burning dry timber and brush southeast of Jenkinson Reservoir.

The fire was estimated to be 60 percent contained.

Smoke is likely to be affecting people living and re-creating in the area.

No structures are threatened.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Brown wants to use 'found' California parks money to encourage donations

By Kevin Yamamura and Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

Gov. Jerry Brown asked lawmakers Friday to spend $20 million in newfound parks money on repairs and a matching fund to solicit future donations rather than return money to donors who gave when they believed the system was broke.

The governor’s announcement came as his Department of Finance determined that none of California’s other 560-plus special funds contain hidden assets akin to what the state parks department tucked away, based on an audit compiled in the past two weeks.

The department, however, found multiple cases totaling $268.5 million in which departments made accounting errors showing either more or less money than the Finance Department knew about in 2011. The biggest error – a $113.3 million mistake in the state Beverage Container Recycling Fund – was corrected before lawmakers and Brown crafted the budget they enacted in June.

Department of Finance Director Ana Matosantos said those gaps were honest mistakes, in contrast to state Department of Parks and Recreation officials “deliberately” hiding assets for years.

“There are accounting differences …,” Matosantos said, “but there are not other hidden asset-type circumstances in other departments.”

Read the whole story

Presidential election comes down to 10 states – including Nevada

By Ken Rudin, NPR

In 92 days, we will either re-elect President Obama or replace him with his Republican opponent, Mitt Romney. On paper, at least, voters in all 50 states and the District of Columbia will make that decision.

But if you look at the travel schedules and campaign budgets of Obama and Romney, it’s clear that the 2012 election will be decided in only ten or fewer states.

I’m not arguing for eliminating the electoral college and calling for the president to be elected by popular vote. But until that happens, and as long as states are considered solidly Democratic (such as California and New York) or solidly Republican (such as Texas), the presidential election is going to be decided by a small number of battleground states where the votes are truly up for grabs.

Obama’s 2008 victory was made possible by his picking up a bunch of states that hadn’t gone Democratic in years (and in some cases, decades) or states that narrowly went to George W. Bush in 2000 and/or 2004: Virginia, North Carolina, Indiana, Ohio, Florida, Colorado, Nevada, Iowa and New Mexico. All nine went for Bush in 2004. Virginia and Indiana hadn’t voted for a Democrat since Lyndon Johnson in 1964. For North Carolina, it was Jimmy Carter in 1976.

Read the whole story

Squaw Valley wants to build housing, retail at the base

Squaw Valley Resorts is proposing to develop a recreation-based, all-season resort community consisting of 1,275 fractional ownership residential and guest accommodation units that would include condominium hotels and semi-attached and detached fractional ownership residential properties.

The four-phase development would be built over 12 to 15 years. The first phase would include approximately 25 acres and almost 1 million square feet of development.

Placer County planning staff gave a presentation recently to the Board of Supervisors.

This project would be on project on a 100-acre portion of the 4,700-acre Squaw Valley General Plan area. The Specific Plan for the development proposes to amend the General Plan.

“This will be a very closely watched proposal as it could have substantial impacts—positive or negative— on water, traffic, air and other quality of life issues for Olympic Valley residents and businesses in the eastern end of Placer County,” Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Jennifer Montgomery said. “Placer County is committed to a full, robust, open and transparent process that will include the voices and input of all affected stakeholders in the region.”

Members of the public also commented on the project and voiced their concerns over several aspects of the project, including its size, building height, water, effect on the valley and Squaw Creek and the Squaw Valley community.

There will be more public meetings in the future.

Study: Nevada’s tax system

means fewer specific incentives for businesses

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – A report from the Council of State Governments exploring the successes that 13 Western states have had with tax incentives to encourage economic growth found that Nevada has fewer such programs in large part because of its tax structure.

Nevada does not have a personal income tax, unitary tax, corporate income tax, inventory tax, estate and/or gift tax, franchise tax, inheritance tax or special intangible tax, notes the report "Trends in Western State Business Incentives" released this week by the CSG.

The report found that Nevada does offer some incentives, including sales tax abatements on capital equipment purchases, a sales and use tax deferral on capital equipment purchases, abatements on personal and modified business taxes and real property tax abatements for recycling.

In addition, the Nevada Train Employees Now Program provides short-term, skills-based intensive job training to assist new and expanding firms to reach their productivity goals quickly.

"While state leaders may not agree on what strategy is best when it comes to reviving our economies, learning how our neighbors are innovating and pushing through tough fiscal times can help guide us as we move forward," said Nevada Assemblywoman Debbie Smith, D-Sparks, chairwoman of CSG West Fiscal Affairs Committee.

"This report adds to our knowledge base and gives policymakers another tool as they look for better, more efficient ways to bring jobs back into our communities and get our states back on track," she said in a press release announcing the release of the document.

While Nevada's incentives may be more limited than those in other Western states, they are playing a major role in the state's successful effort to bring Apple to Reno to build a new data center and related facilities that are expected to bring $1 billion in investment over the next decade. Part of the deal includes $89 million in sales tax and personal property tax abatements.

The tax breaks were discussed this week by the state Board of Economic Development, which includes Gov. Brian Sandoval, a strong advocate of the deal that is bringing Apple to Nevada.

The CSG report also noted the work by Sandoval and the 2011 Legislature that completely reorganized the state's economic development efforts. The new Governor's Office of Economic Development has taken over the tasks of job development and diversification.

Diversification and job creation are top priorities for Sandoval, who has set a goal of creating 50,000 jobs in Nevada by the end of 2014.

The report also mentions Assembly Bill 202 from 2011, which provides for a partial abatement of some property taxes for eligible new manufacturing businesses, including those that renovate an existing building or other structure.

But Nevada has come in for some criticism for failing to evaluate the effectiveness of its tax incentives. A study by the Pew Center on the States released in April identified Nevada as one of 16 states that did not publish a document between 2007 and 2011 that performed such an evaluation.

Jennifer Burnett, CSG's program manager for research services and special projects, said in a news release on today's findings that there are definite trends in the kinds of economic incentives Western states are using.

“Although each state approaches development differently, every state relies on incentives in varying degrees as a component of their overall strategy,” she said. “For example, every Western state offers a tax exemption on raw materials used in manufacturing, while almost all states offer exemptions on goods in transit, manufacturers’ inventories and raw materials.”

Burnett also said state leaders are looking more closely at how incentives are used and more closely scrutinizing the payoff, which could mean big changes in the future of state economic development strategies.

“States have cut basic, essential programs — like education and infrastructure — to the bone and leaders don’t want to make even deeper cuts,” she said. “That means everything is on the table for discussion, including incentives and whether they are getting the return on investment they should be.”

Study: Wildfire risk to homes will double in 40 years

Publisher’s note: ***Getting rid of shake roofs is one way to protect homes. Lake Valley and Meeks Bay fire departments have grant funds to help homeowners put on a new roof. South Lake Tahoe Fire Department was asked to help write the grant and then get some of the money, but didn’t do so according to Fire Chief Brian Uhler,” … because we don’t have a dedicated bureau for fire prevention — a limitation relative to requirements***

to be eligible for applying for the grant.”

By Merced Sun-Star

Climate change, population growth in rural areas and other factors could double the risk wildfires pose to homes within the next 40 years, according to a UC Merced study.

The information is part of a report by UC Merced Professor Anthony Westerling, prepared for the California Energy Commission.

In the paper, released Wednesday, Westerling and co-author Ben Bryant looked at the impacts of climate change, the state’s projected population growth, urban and rural development, and land-use decisions on wildfires around the state in the coming century.

“Climate change is going to alter wildfire in our state,” Westerling said, in a press release from UC Merced. “How and where we build our homes, and how we manage the landscape around them, will shape our vulnerability to wildfire.”

Although policies to deal with climate change could help, Westerling said some level of additional warming is going to occur regardless.

As a result, smart-growth strategies for land use, such as concentrating growth in existing urban areas, educating people about implementing fire-proofing practices, such as creating defensible space around their homes, will help lessen the threat.

Fire-resistant home construction would help, especially in areas likely to be particularly threatened as the climate gets warmer.

“Fire suppression, fuels management and development policies, such as zoning and building codes, are the primary means we have to manage wildfire risks,” he said.

In addition, more people are building homes in forested areas. More developed rural land means a greater the chance for wildfires, the data shows, which increases the threat to the homes.

Read the whole story

Californis using special funds to pay for basics

By Kevin Yamamura, Sacramento Bee

California drivers pay fees for smog checks, vehicle registrations and new tires, all supposedly for programs that benefit roadway use.

Consumers pay fees to recycle beverage containers, televisions and computers. Doctors and accountants pay license fees to regulate their industries.

But for more than a decade, the special funds collecting these dollars have served a second purpose: helping California pay for schools, social services and prisons that are supposed to be funded by general taxes.

California has 560 funds deemed “special” because in theory they’re walled off from general state expenditures. In the face of two recessions, however, California reached deeper into those funds for purposes that fee payers never intended. The state now owes $4.3 billion to special funds, more than five times the amount owed in 2008.

State leaders argue that special funds have enough extra money to pay for more critical state needs. Some special fund reserves grew after the state imposed furloughs on all state workers starting in 2009.

But program advocates say the borrowed money should have gone toward intended uses like reducing pollution or better enforcement of health care fields. Or, they suggest, it should have gone back to consumers and professionals through lower fees.

"Any of these funds set up by ratepayer money needs to be spent on its intended purpose," said Mark Toney, executive director of The Utility Reform Network, a consumer advocacy group that has watched the state borrow $296 million in telephone-related surcharges. "The purpose is not to serve as a (state) piggy bank."

Gov. Jerry Brown says the state will eventually repay $4.3 billion in outstanding special fund loans with interest, a promise that assumes voters will pass tax hikes in November. But state officials never retired $448 million in special fund loans from 2002 and 2003 even during good times. And $1.3 billion in loans have no repayment date in state law.

Read the whole story

Panel: Spend $4 mil. to fund Nev. student tracking system

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – A state panel charged with implementing a system to track individual student performance from preschool through entry into the workforce is recommending that $4 million in state funds be appropriated by Gov. Brian Sandoval and the 2013 Legislature to help accomplish the task.

The P-16 Council, led by chairwoman and state Sen. Barbara Cegavske, R-Las Vegas, finalized its recommendations to Sandoval on Monday, proposing the funding to ensure the Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) project moves forward in the next two-year budget.

“Everybody’s really been doing a yeoman’s job, I mean really working hard to get the information that we need to continue on,” she said. “I think the governor is going to be very pleased. I’ll be anxious for his review as well.

“So we’re really excited to be able to move on with this,” Cegavske said. “And we’re going to be like other states. It took a lot of people a long time to put theirs together and we’re not going to be any different. But I’m very hopeful that all entities will join and we’ll be able to get this done in a reasonable amount of time.”

Sandoval issued an Executive Order on Oct. 7, 2011, asking the council to take the necessary steps to create the system to track students, following the lead of other states as part of an effort to reform education and improve student performance in Nevada.

The effort got a boost in June when the Nevada Department of Education was awarded a $4 million grant from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) to develop the SLDS. Nevada was one of 24 states to receive funding to support the design and implementation of its tracking system.

The three-year grant will create and assign a Unique State Personal Identifier so that students, teachers and those in the workforce can be followed from pre-school through grade 12, into post-secondary education and on into the workforce.

The grant will also be used to fund an in-depth technical needs assessment at the state Department of Education, the Nevada System of Higher Education and the state Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation to determine solutions for implementing the enhanced SLDS. The assessment is expected to be completed by June 2013.

But the P-16 Council, in its report, said that state funding will be needed to accomplish the solutions identified in the assessment. In addition, funding will be needed to incorporate early childhood data into the SLDS – a project that is not included within the grant.

As a result, the council made the funding recommendation to support the next steps of the SLDS project and sustain it beyond the grant funding.

The council made no recommendations on data polices, such as which data elements will be shared and how, or how privacy will be protected, saying such decisions are premature until the needs assessment is completed.

In introductory remarks to the council in November 2011, Sandoval said he wants Nevada to create a data system that will put it on a par with states that have successfully accomplished the task, including Florida, Maine, Connecticut and Washington. The information, including performance measures of educators, is critical to moving Nevada forward in student achievement, he said.

A new panel, called the Teachers and Leaders Council, was created as a result of legislation passed in the 2011 session, Sandoval said. It is charged with developing a statewide performance evaluation system for administrators and classroom teachers. Half of the evaluation must be based on student data, which is why the charge to the P-16 Council is so important, he said.

“This is a historical moment, this is really a crossroads in the state of Nevada and we have some great opportunities to really improve the delivery of education in this state," Sandoval said.

The Department of Education has already created a student data system, but it is not as comprehensive as required for Sandoval's education reform efforts.

A national report showed that Nevada made progress in this data collection effort in 2011. The Data Quality Campaign's (DQC) seventh annual state analysis, Data for Action 2011, shows that states have made major progress building their student data systems. More states than ever – 36, up from zero in 2005, including Nevada – have implemented all of DQC's 10 Essential Elements of Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems.

California begins sending bills for fire protection

El Dorado County officials are advising county residents that the California will soon issue Fire Prevention Fee bills.

Each property owner in state responsibility area where CalFire provides fire protection will be assessed an annual $150 fee per habitable structure. A $35 reduction applies if the property is also located within a local fire district.

The new state fee was approved was approved by the Legislature and governor last year. The State Board of Equalization is expected to begin issuing the first bills this month. Billing will proceed alphabetically by county name.

"Although El Dorado County is the 29th largest county in terms of population, we are the fourth largest in terms of fire fee bills due to the size of the State Responsibility Area," Terri Daly, chief administrative officer, said in a statement. "This new state fee hits our residents hard, and has the potential to create a lot of confusion."

Most of the populated areas of El Dorado County are already part of a local fire protection district. In most instances, local fire districts are the first responders to emergency calls. Neither the county nor local fire districts receive any additional funding through the State Fire Prevention Fee.

At a meeting in South Lake Tahoe this summer Kelly Keenan with CalFire explained the tax means $89 million for CalFire, but in reality the department's budget from the state has been reduced by that same amount so the tax is not a net gain to the state fire agency. What people are paying for is unknown. The tax really goes to the general fund to be spent however the governor and Legislature want.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Tahoe Truckee recognized for effort to increase student reading ability

Truckee was named an All-America City by the National Civic League based on its ambitious plan to ensure that more children are reading at grade level by the end of third grade.

Chosen from a field of more than 100 entries, Tahoe Truckee

Unified School District’s plan was submitted by a community coalition that included the Excellence in Education Foundation, Tahoe Truckee Community Foundation, Community Collaborative of Tahoe Truckee, Tahoe Truckee Unified School District, Placer County Health and Human Services and First 5 Nevada County. The community was one of 14 awardees selected from 32 finalists.

Beyond the award contest, Tahoe Truckee’s plan makes the region a charter member in the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading Communities Network, a national movement of local and state leaders, nonprofits, and foundations putting a stake in the ground on third-grade reading. That milestone marks the point when children shift from learning to read and begin reading to learn. Students who haven’t mastered reading by then are more likely to get stuck in a cycle of academic failure, drop out of school, and struggle throughout their lives.

The awards are given each year by the National Civic League for outstanding civic accomplishments.