Robbers Fire at 2,400+ acres, 30% containment

By Loretta Kalb, Sacramento Bee

The Robbers Fire, which consumed one home and four outbuildings in Placer County, grew to 2,400 acres Sunday and is now 30 percent contained, the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection reported.

More than 2,100 firefighters from San Diego to Siskiyou County battled the blaze, which is burning in areas that are remote, steep and overgrown with heavy brush and timber.

“Every afternoon when the temperatures heat up and get to their peak, the fire becomes very active,” Cal Fire spokesman Daniel Berlant said. “That’s when we see it making its run through some of these steep areas.”

Berlant said firefighters are working hard to overtake the blaze “because there is so much potential for this fire to grow.”

On Sunday the fire threatened a small community known as Brush Creek, with a few dozen homes, Berlant said. Crews were still protecting homes late Sunday, according to officials.

Read the whole story

Truckee man identified as

cyclist who died

The bicyclist who was killed near Donner Lake on July 13 has been identified as Larry Sage.

The 53-year-old Truckee man was wearing a helmet, but still suffered massive head injuries. The cause of death is pending autopsy results.

He was on a group bicycle ride when the crash occurred on Old Highway 40 near South Shore Drive. No other bikes or vehicles were involved.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Clock ticking for committee to recommend field upgrades

By Anne Knowles

In the end, it may come down to the difference between wish lists and must haves.

The Fields Advisory Committee of the South Lake Tahoe Recreation Facilities Joint Powers Authority meets today for the final time before making its recommendation on how to allocate money to fix up South Lake Tahoe fields used for baseball, softball and soccer.

Dugouts are just one issue with the softball field at South Tahoe High School. Photo/LTN file

The committee meets at 4pm at Lake Tahoe Airport, where members will discuss how to spend $500,000 of Measure R funds on all or some of the fields at South Tahoe Middle School, Al Tahoe, Sierra House School, Meyers Magnet School, and the South Tahoe High School softball field. The committee's recommendation will be delivered to the JPA at its meeting on July 27.

On a public field trip to the various sites July 2, there seemed to be committee consensus that the priority should be finishing the high school softball field first, although there was a difference of opinion on how extensive the work should be there.

From $40,000 to $60,000 more is needed to complete construction of the field and to add permanent fencing, a flagpole and a public address system, said Sue Novasel, a Lake Tahoe Unified School District board member.

Those additions, Novasel believes, would bring the city into Title IX compliance.

"Those are the three things I think that are needed to put the field on par with the boys," said Novasel.

So far, construction on the field, including dugouts, has cost about $154,000, said Novasel, and the school board at its last meeting approved up $160,000.

During the field trip, committee member Marilyn Breisacher and Steve Morales, facilities director for the district, locked horns over a "wish list" of additional items for the high school softball field.

Breisacher presented a rendering of the field that included shortening the dugout to give people sitting in the bleachers better visibility of the bases as well as a plan to raise the floor in the announcers' booth.

"I couldn't justify it," said Morales, referring to the changes in the dugout. "I believe we created line of sight."

The committee also visited several other fields and discussed plans for them that included overhauling the Al Tahoe Fields with a new, full-size baseball field, upgrades to the two Little League fields, and a replacement T-ball field as well as a scorer's booth and bleachers at the South Tahoe Middle School softball field.

The fields committee will make its final recommendation at the JPA meeting on July 27 at 9am at Lake Tahoe Airport.

Dog groomers snarl at proposed California

legislation

By Ricardo Lopez, Los Angeles Times

California already licenses furniture upholsterers, private investigators and recreation guides.

Now it wants to regulate pet groomers.

In a state that leads the country in the number of professions requiring a license, a bill moving through the Legislature has struck a nerve among those who clip Fido and Fluffy.

Sen. Juan Vargas (D-San Diego), author of the proposed legislation, wants to provide pet owners “peace of mind” by creating a voluntary certification program. Groomers would have to complete about 900 hours of training and pay an as-yet unspecified fee to be certified by the state — a designation that amounts to a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval.

Vargas says the measure, known as SB 969, is intended to protect pets from untrained groomers. He said he drafted the bill after learning about lacerations, broken bones — and in one case, death — that some animals suffered during trips to their barbers.

“The pets really are the silent victims,” Vargas said. “They can’t tell you what happens.”

Vargas’ initial aim was to force California’s pet groomers to obtain a state license that would have required them to pass an exam and carry insurance. But that proposal lost much of its bite after facing opposition from small-business groups. A similar bill stalled in 2005.

But even the watered-down version has some groomers growling. They fear that voluntary certification is just a precursor to eventual licensing that would snag California’s estimated 11,000 pet barbers in more red tape.

“I want the government out of my salon,” said Johnny Ray, co-owner of the Dog House in North Hollywood. “It’s just a money grab.”

Read the whole story

Tribes look to expand casinos beyond reservation land

By Rob Hotakainen, McClatchy Newspapers

WASHINGTON — After buying a new chunk of land 50 miles north of San Francisco, the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria just broke ground on a new, Las Vegas-style casino. It will be the largest in the Bay Area, with 3,000 slot machines, 200 hotel rooms, a spa, bars, restaurants and parking for more than 5,000 cars.

In New York, the Shinnecock Indian Nation is considering Long Island as a site on which to build the Big Apple’s first tribal casino.

And in Washington state, the Spokane Tribe of Indians wants a new 13-story casino and hotel next to the Fairchild Air Force Base, prompting fears that the city will become “Spo-Vegas.”

The plans are extraordinary for one reason: In all three cases, the tribes want to build their palaces on new land that’s not part of their original reservations.

The expansions are the latest twist in the nation’s Indian casino wars, and they mark a major shift for the tribes, which already run 385 casinos and bingo halls in 29 states.

Read the whole story

California study confirms pot’s medicinal value

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

University of California medical researchers slipped an ingredient in chili peppers beneath the skin of marijuana smokers to see if pot could relieve acute pain. It could – at certain doses.

They monitored patients with AIDS and HIV as they toked on joints or placebos to determine whether marijuana could quell agonizing pain from nerve damage. It provided relief.

They tested a “Volcano Vaporizer” to see whether inhaling smokeless pot delivered healthier, low-tar cannabis. It did.

Over a dozen years, California’s historic experiment in medical marijuana research brought new science to the debate on marijuana’s place in medicine. State-funded studies – costing $8.7 million – found pot may offer broad benefits for pain from nerve damage from injuries, HIV, strokes and other conditions.

California’s famed Center for Medicinal Cannabis Research – established by the Legislature to answer the question, “Does marijuana have therapeutic value?” – has now all but completed America’s most comprehensive studies into the efficacy of pot.

Read the whole story

Alpine County high voter turnout in June defies state trend

By Jim Sanders, Sacramento Bee

California's election turnout last month set a record low for a presidential primary in the state, with more than two of every three registered voters opting not to cast ballots.

Oddly, in light of the dismal turnout, more Californians than ever before voted by mail – with 65 percent of ballots cast coming via the Postal Service, the secretary of state's office said Friday.

The previous high for vote-by-mail was 62 percent, set in May 2009.

"Given the ease and convenience that voting by mail offers, it's not surprising to see more and more people choose to cast their ballots from home," Secretary of State Debra Bowen said in a written statement.

Bowen gave no explanation for the massive numbers of registered voters who sat out this year's election altogether, however.

Turnout statewide was 31.1 percent, shattering the previous record low of 41.9 percent for a presidential primary, recorded in 1996. State figures track balloting since 1914.

Mark DiCamillo, Field Poll director, predicted bare-bottom turnout – he pegged it at 35 percent – shortly before ballots were cast.

There were few fireworks on this year's ballot: California was insignificant to the Republican presidential contest, President Obama had no challenger among Democrats, U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein faced no serious opposition, and there were few hot-button issues to bolster turnout.

Neither Proposition 28, involving changes to legislative term limits, nor Proposition 29, a proposed tobacco tax, was likely to drive up turnout significantly, DiCamillo said last month.

Though worst for a presidential primary, this year's turnout did not scrape bottom for any statewide election in California. The all-time low – 28.2 percent of registered voters – was set in June 2008, state records show.

Counties with the highest turnout in last month's election were Sierra, 59.2 percent; Alpine, 58.6 percent; and Amador, 57.1 percent. Voter participation was lowest in the counties of Los Angeles, 21.8 percent; San Bernardino, 23.7 percent; and Orange, 26.5 percent.

All four capital-area counties topped California's 31.1 percent voter turnout. El Dorado's turnout was 46.2 percent; Placer, 45.7 percent; Yolo, 37.7 percent; and Sacramento, 35.6 percent.

Structures destroyed in growing Robbers Fire

By Sam Stanton, Sacramento Bee

The Robbers Fire in Placer County continued to grow Saturday and was blamed for destroying its first structures – one home and three outbuildings — but firefighters were making progress at getting a handle on it.

The fire had burned 1,950 acres by Saturday night and still was threatening 170 homes in areas near Iowa Hill, Foresthill and other communities. Officials could not pinpoint the location late Saturday of the burned structures.

Department of Forestry and Fire Protection officials said the fire containment had grown to 20 percent from 10 percent on Friday night.

More than 1,900 firefighters and a huge amount of equipment, including 15 helicopters and 36 bulldozers, were battling the stubborn blaze that broke out Wednesday afternoon.

Read the whole story

NOAA report examines extreme weather in 2011

By Chris Dolce, Weather Channel

The National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has released its state of the climate report along with a separate article explaining some of the extreme events of 2011 from a climate perspective.

"2011 will be remembered as a year of extreme events, both in the United States and around the world," said Deputy NOAA Administrator Kathryn D. Sullivan. "Every weather event that happens now takes place in the context of a changing global environment. This annual report provides scientists and citizens alike with an analysis of what has happened so we can all prepare for what is to come."

NOAA says back-to-back La Ninas (cooling of the equatorial Pacific Ocean) affected regional climates and influenced many of the world's significant weather events in 2011.

Read the whole story

Nevada contractors turn to NDOT to secure funds

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – About $87 million in state taxes that could be parlayed into 10 times as much to pay for critical road improvements are ready to flow to the state Department of Transportation next year, but there are concerns the money could be diverted to other needs.

The Nevada Chapter of the Associated General Contractors has asked the Nevada Department of Transportation's Board of Directors to work with the Legislature to ensure the revenue remains dedicated to the State Highway Fund.

An estimated 25,000 jobs could be created with the funding if the money was used to sell bonds, said John Madole, executive director of the Nevada AGC. About $870 million could be generated for road projects in the next two-year budget under this option, he said.

"We think it's important as the fiscal 2014-2015 budget building process begins, that policymakers are mindful of continuing the commitment made several years ago to improve funding for Nevada's highways," Madole said. "This funding infusion comes at a crucial time for Nevada, since the current ending fund balance in the State Highway Fund is now depleted to record low levels not seen in more than two decades.”

The additional tax money is set to flow to NDOT as the result of two separate measures already approved by the Legislature.

Senate Bill 429 of the 2009 session raised money for the cash-strapped general fund in part by slowing the depreciation on vehicles when motorists pay their registration fees. The measure required, however, that the additional revenue from the governmental services tax go to the State Highway Fund instead of the general fund starting on July 1, 2013. About $61 million a year would be made available for road projects.

Senate Bill 429 became the package of taxes proposed to sunset on June 30, 2011, but extended in the current budget as part of a deal between Gov. Brian Sandoval and a majority of state lawmakers.

The other measure is contained within Senate Bill 503 of the 2011 session, which temporarily increased the amount of money the Department of Motor Vehicles could spend on administrative costs for two years. The expiration of this provision will provide an additional $26 million a year to the Highway Fund beginning in July 2013.

DMV spokesman Kevin Malone said today the agency will be seeking the lower level of administrative costs in the next budget.

But Nevada’s general fund demands, from funding for public education to an expanding Medicaid population, could potentially put these funding streams for road projects at risk.

Sandoval said in March he will extend the “temporary” tax package into the next two-year budget to avoid cuts to education, including a 0.35 percent sales tax increase and a higher tax rate for large businesses under the payroll tax. Whether this means the vehicle registration money will also be retained to support the general fund is not yet clear.

The process of preparing the next two-year spending plan is now under way and Sandoval spokeswoman Mary-Sarah Kinner said today the budget issues must be analyzed first before decisions are made on all of the elements of the sunsetting tax package, such as the motor vehicle registration revenue.

Madole said the job creation potential from the increased highway funding would help Sandoval meet his goal of creating 50,000 new jobs in Nevada by the end of 2014.

A draft resolution of support for ensuring the revenues go to the State Highway Fund as planned was submitted to the NDOT Board of Directors by Madole last month with a request that it be considered at its July 23 meeting. Sandoval is chairman of the board.

“I think it’s very important because since 1992 . . . there have been no increased revenues for state highway funding,” Madole said. “We believe that that money, because it is an identifiable source that’s a pretty stable source of revenue, I’m not a bonding expert, but we’ve had others look at it and say that money could support bonds.”

The gas tax has not been increased since that time while inflation has probably risen by 35 percent to 45 percent during the same period, he said.

Gas tax revenues are declining in part because of increased fuel efficiency, causing the NDOT to consider alternative ways of raising revenue for roads. NDOT is in the midst of a multi-year study of the Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) tax, which would replace the existing fuel tax and be levied based on the number of miles a car travels rather than the amount of gas it consumes.