

Groundwater supply being depleted throughout the world

By Devin Powell, Science News

SAN FRANCISCO – Groundwater levels have dropped in many places across the globe over the past nine years, a pair of gravity-monitoring satellites finds. This trend raises concerns that farmers are pumping too much water out of the ground in dry regions.

Water has been disappearing beneath southern Argentina, western Australia and stretches of the United States. The decline is especially pronounced in parts of California, India, the Middle East and China, where expanding agriculture has increased water demand.

“Groundwater is being depleted at a rapid clip in virtually of all of the major aquifers in the world’s arid and semiarid regions,” says Jay Famiglietti, a hydrologist at the University of California Center for Hydrologic Modeling in Irvine, whose team presented the new trends December 6 at a meeting of the American Geophysical Union.

Famiglietti and his colleagues detect water hidden below the surface using the modern equivalent of a dowsing rod: a pair of car-sized satellites, nicknamed Tom and Jerry, that are especially sensitive to the tug of gravity from below.

As the spacecraft chase each other around the planet like their cat and mouse namesakes, they are pulled apart and pushed together by areas of higher or lower gravity. Mountains and other large concentrations of mass have a big, obvious effect that’s consistent from month to month. But water moves around over time, creating small gravity fluctuations that the satellites’ orbital motions respond to.

Read the whole story

Woodpecker may alter how USFS manages its land

By Kathryn Reed

A woodpecker may change the way the U.S. Forest Service and others approach thinning projects and forest restoration work in California.

This is because on Dec. 15 the state Fish and Game Commission on a 3-1 vote said the black-backed woodpecker is a candidate for protection under the state's Endangered Species Act. (Commissioner Daniel Richards was the dissenting vote.)



Black-backed
woodpecker

This is the same woodpecker species that Earth Island Justice's John Muir Project said should prevent the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit from initiating the South Shore Fuels Reduction Project and the same animal Earth Justice wants to protect in its quest to halt the Angora Fire restoration project.

It could be a year before the state decides what to do about

the woodpecker. The Department of Fish & Game has until next December to prepare a status review on the species. After that, the commission votes on whether to protect the bird.

It's the Center for Biological Diversity and the Earth Island Institute's John Muir Project that are pushing for the woodpecker's protection.

"Black-backed are heavily associated with areas burned at higher fire severities, much more so than unburned forest or low-intensity burn areas (Hutto 2008). Unless steps are taken to ensure that significant habitat is created and allowed for this species in the project area, the project could threaten the viability of the black-backed woodpecker by further reducing potential habitat across the landscape, thus violating the forest plan's requirement to ensure viability," Chad Hanson, director of the John Muir Project, wrote in his October letter to the USFS. His group wants the final environmental impact statement for the South Shore Fuels Reduction Project to be withdrawn and a supplemental environmental impact statement be prepared.

Those same arguments are being used to lobby the state.

Hanson is the author of a paper titled "Myth of 'Catastrophic' Wildfire".

A judge sided with the Forest Service over conservation groups regarding the Angora project. This meant work started this summer to thin the area – an area the John Muir Project believes should be left alone because it says it provides habitat for the woodpecker.

This is the Forest Service owned land near where 254 houses burned to the ground in June 2007.

The Forest Service says not clearing the trees will increase the threat of another catastrophic fire.

While the thinning project started this summer, the case is still tied up in the Ninth U.S. District Court of Appeals. If the state says the woodpecker should be listed as endangered, it could make the court case a moot point.

The bird is rare, with people differing over whether it's always been rare or if its numbers are in decline.

Lose the fleece, bring out the shorts in Tahoe

After frigid temperatures, it's like a heat wave has hit the Lake Tahoe Basin. South Lake Tahoe on Sunday tied a record and Monday broke a record for the high of the day.

At Lake Tahoe Airport the mercury crept up to 56 degrees Dec. 26, breaking the record of 55 set in 1976. Truckee had a high of 54 Monday, but it was not a record.



It was warm
enough for
shorts at
Heavenly
Village on
Dec. 25.
Photo/Kathryn
Reed

On Dec. 25 the 55-degree reading in South Lake Tahoe tied the record first set in 1980.

The National Weather Service in Reno says to expect balmy weather into the New Year, with temps hovering around 50 degrees.

The high pressure system that had been sitting off the coast bringing the dry conditions is now directly above the region, which is the cause of the warmth.

A 20 percent chance of moisture is in the forecast for the basin from Tuesday night into Wednesday, but if anything comes of it, meteorologists say it won't amount to much. More rain than snow is likely to fall because it's so warm out.

– Kathryn Reed

Business interests killed the most number of bills in California

By Laurel Rosenhall, Sacramento Bee and and Chase Davis, California Watch

Business interests were the top bill killers inside California's Capitol during Gov. Jerry Brown's first year back in office, as concerns about the state's weak economy cut into labor's newfound clout.

Legislative data show business interests wielded strong influence despite a Capitol dominated by Democrats in the Legislature and the Governor's Office. Business lobbyists defeated bills that would have cut back various tax breaks, required employers to give workers unpaid bereavement leave and prolonged the foreclosure process.

In the current economy, "all legislators are more sensitive to the argument that something would be a job killer or harmful for investment or expansion," said Dorothy Rothrock, a lobbyist for the California Manufacturers and Technology Association, which represents major businesses around the state. "That's made it easier for us to stop or amend bills to make them less hostile or burdensome." Brown's first year back was good for labor unions, too. They successfully pushed bills that limit the state's ability to use private contractors, allow local governments to require union construction crews on public works projects, and reduce the use of electronic self-checkout lanes in grocery stores.

But in the tug-of-war between the Capitol's two power players, industry more than held its own. Business-related groups dominated the list of organizations with the most influence, according to a review of hundreds of bills.

The *Bee* and California Watch examined the final analyses written by legislative staff for all 906 bills introduced this year that listed supporters and opponents. For each group whose stand was registered on at least 10 bills, the news organizations tallied the number of cases in which supporters' bills were signed by the governor and opponents' bills stalled or were vetoed. Either scenario counted as a "win" for that group.

While such a tally is imperfect – it does not assess all influence exerted under the dome – it captures the outcome of the legislative year for many who carry clout at the Capitol.

Read the whole story

Postal cuts worry at-home entrepreneurs

By Karen E. Klein, Bloomberg Businessweek

When he hears about planned U.S. Postal Service cutbacks and closings in 2012, Michael Weiss doesn't think they're going to affect his business.

Like many service providers, Weiss' digital strategy consulting firm, Figure 18 in Westlake Village (Los Angeles/Ventura counties), operates almost entirely with electronic tools and increasingly conducts business over the Internet.

"I take payments and do all my financial transactions online," said Weiss, 42. "I just negotiated a six-month contract that

went back and forth online, and we both signed it digitally. We never even printed it out.”

The shift away from first-class mail is one of the reasons the Postal Service has been pressed to come up with a series of cost-cutting measures, including possibly eliminating Saturday mail delivery. A legal requirement that the service must prefund health care retirement benefits for future retirees is another burden – one that many post office employees and supporters protest as unfair.

Business owners who will perhaps be hurt most if the cutbacks planned for May actually take place are the 21 million-plus “nonemployer firms.” That’s the term the Census Bureau uses to define the self-employed, sole proprietors who account for nearly three-quarters of all U.S. businesses and about \$972.7 billion in annual business revenue, roughly 3 percent of total U.S. business activity.

Kristy Wiggins-Gilbraith, who was laid off from her job as a pharmaceutical consultant in 2010, relies on income from the natural bath and body products company she founded to stay off unemployment. Others become eBay sellers or run small enterprises from their kitchen tables to contribute extra income to households struggling to stay in the middle class.

Postal cutbacks could be devastating to businesses like Wiggins-Gilbraith’s venture, Green Beetle Bath, which she said brought in about \$50,000 this year. “I rely 99 percent of the time on the Postal Service to ship my products, unless the customer requests next-day service,” said Wiggins-Gilbraith, 36.

Read the whole story

Zillow study: Home value decline slows

By Tim Mullaney, USA Today

After years of pain and a market free fall that has shaved \$6.8 trillion off the value of the nation's 104 million homes, the decline in U.S. house prices may be nearly over.

U.S. homeowners lost \$681 billion this year, according to a study by real estate website operator Zillow that was released this week.

That's less than the \$1.1 trillion drop in value in 2010, let alone the \$2.7 trillion in losses in 2008, Zillow said. And a Zillow survey of 109 economists said U.S. home prices will stop falling late next year or early 2013, with the most optimistic quarter of economists predicting an 18 percent rebound by 2016.

The reason is that the economy is slowly turning around, as prices have come into balance with buyers' incomes and how much they'd pay to rent comparable homes, said David Blitzer, chairman of the index committee at Standard & Poor's, which publishes the S&P/Case-Shiller national home price index. The negatives are that consumer confidence is low, and there's an overhang of foreclosed homes whose owners will discount them for resale, economists said.

Read the whole story

No guarantee of finding work out of state

By Phillip Reese, Sacramento Bee

Escape isn't easy.

As California buckled under layoffs and hiring freezes last year, tens of thousands of residents saw lower unemployment rates in other states and decided to move.

Many couldn't find jobs near their new homes either. The unemployment rate in 2010 among former Californians who had left the state during the previous 12 months was 19 percent, according to a Bee analysis of new U.S. census data. By comparison, the unemployment rate in the state they left behind was 12 percent.

Those figures partly reflect the dismal job markets in other places. Moving from California to Nevada, which has the nation's highest unemployment rate, isn't the safest bet, but 30,000 people tried it anyway last year.

Texas looked safer. It has added roughly 150,000 jobs since the start of the recession, and 50,000 Californians moved there last year, a higher number than moved to any other state.

But 15 percent of those former Californians couldn't find jobs when they got to Texas, according to The Bee analysis.

The statewide unemployment rate in Texas is 8.1 percent – about half a percentage point better than the national average, but still high by historical standards. The contradiction in Texas – more jobs but relatively higher unemployment – is largely due to movers, particularly from California. More than 160,000 Californians have moved to Texas

since the start of the recession.

“We have produced lots of jobs but, despite that, our unemployment rate is about as high as everywhere else,” said Daniel Hamermesh, professor of economics at the University of Texas at Austin. “The reason is simple: We attract migrants.”

Read the whole story

Sandoval reflects on past year and what lies ahead

By Ray Hagar, Reno Gazette-Journal

Brian Sandoval, a former Nevada attorney general, federal judge and chairman of the Gaming Commission, was elected governor of Nevada in November 2010, handily beating Rory Reid of Las Vegas in the general election and former Gov. Jim Gibbons in the GOP primary.

Sandoval, a Reno resident who graduated from Bishop Manogue High School and the University of Nevada, Reno, inherited a state that led the nation in unemployment foreclosures and bankruptcies. He said during the campaign and after the election that job creation and economic development were his top priorities.

Now, Sandoval is nearing the end of his first year in office and has weathered a budget battle in the Nevada Legislature, his appointment of Dean Heller to Nevada's open U.S. Senate seat, a court-ordered redistricting process and numerous tragedies that hit Northern Nevada. *Reno Gazette-Journal* political reporter Ray Hagar sat down with Sandoval for a one-

on-one interview recently, looking back at his first year in office and looking forward to his future plans.

Read the whole story

Incline woman accused of possessing stolen property

Washoe County sheriff's detectives on Dec. 22 arrested Tavia Toussaint, 34, of Incline Village on possession of stolen property charges after she alleged negotiated the sale of an antique wagon to detectives.



A trailer, which the wagon was sitting on, was also seized pending further investigation into possessing additional stolen property. The trailer had recently been repainted and the identification plates were removed, deputies said.

The wagon, reportedly one of the first center dump wagons to be used in early road construction, had been on property in Reno which is owned by an older woman. A similar wagon, believed to be the only other wagon of its type in the area, sits on the Nevada Department of Transportation grounds.

The caretaker of the property conducted his own research on a local Internet private party sales site, located the wagon for sale in Reno. The ad indicated the wagon was prepared for sale and delivery, with the ad being posted the day prior.

Sheriff's detectives and the All Threats All Crimes Unit conducted an undercover sting operation, posing as potential

buyers for the wagon. The caretaker was able to positively identify the old wagon, valued in excess of \$1,000.

Detectives are following several leads in an effort to identify the suspect(s) who stole the wagon. Anyone with information regarding this investigation is urged to call (775) 328.3326, or anonymously through Secret Witness at (775) 322.4900.

Nevada approves regulations for Internet poker

By Richard N. Velotta, Las Vegas Sun

The Nevada Gaming Commission approved the nation's first regulations for Internet poker play Thursday, opening the door to the licensing of companies to offer online play within the state.

Play across state lines still wouldn't be allowed because of restrictions imposed by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Representatives of the industry applauded the unanimous vote and companies already licensed by the state can apply to expand their current status. Companies that haven't been licensed in Nevada would undergo the same investigative scrutiny required by state gaming regulations.

The new regulations require applicants to prove their ability to maintain controls on player registration, prevent underage play and establish the location of players before being licensed.

Regulations also address what information must be presented on

their websites, record keeping, dispute resolution, fees and taxation and problem gambling notifications.

Six companies already have applications in the regulatory pipeline for licensing: Cantor Gaming, Shuffle Master, International Game Technology, Bally's Technology, Caesars Entertainment and the South Point.

Read the whole story