

U.S. weather disasters hit \$35 bil. for 2011 – with 4 months to go

By Deborah Netburn, Los Angeles Times

The weather is costing America a lot of money.

A new report from the National Climatic Data Center shows that in 2011 alone, there have been nine U.S. weather-related disasters that have each caused more than \$1 billion in damages. The report estimates these disasters have cost the U.S. \$35 billion so far this year.

And we've still got four months left to go.

The most expensive of the 2011 disasters detailed in the report is the series of tornadoes that hit the central and southern states from April 25-30. States affected include Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia, Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, Ohio, Texas and Oklahoma. A total of 305 tornadoes swept through those states, causing total losses greater than \$9 billion.

It was also the deadliest disaster. The tornadoes killed 327 people.

Read the whole story

TRPA: Amphibious tourist mobile not hurting lake clarity

By Anne Knowles

If you're wondering if you saw a white boat with wheels drive off Highway 50 into Lake Tahoe sometime this summer, you did. And if you're wondering if it's legal, it is.

Tahoe Duck Tours, in its first full summer of operations, is offering daily, multiple hour-plus tours of the lake on its amphibious vehicles it calls ducks. The World War II-era boats feature six wheels, a watertight hull, a propeller and a canopy-covered deck that seats 24.

Several times a day, the ducks pick up passengers at Heavenly Village near Stateline and travel the five miles via 50 and Tahoe Keys Boulevard to the Tahoe Keys Marina where they enter the water. An hour and 20 minutes later, they emerge and make the five-mile trek back, but not before being cleaned of milfoil, an invasive weed found in the lake.



A duck boat driver/captain was cleaning underneath the vehicle/boat Aug. 18 at the

Tahoe Keys
Marina parking
lot before
hopping
aboard.
Photo/Kathryn
Reed

“We take a lot of plant material off,” said Shawn Kearney, owner of Tahoe Duck Tours in South Lake Tahoe. “The boat gets dirtier than we get the lake.”

Each vehicle is cleaned of road sediment once a day, in the morning before the first trip. And they take additional care on the boats’ exteriors.

“We use food-grade oil, the same used on meat slicers, for anything that comes in contact with the water,” Kearney said. “It is non-toxic.”

The ducks are permitted by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency as well as regulated by the U.S. Coast Guard and the California Highway Patrol.

The TRPA permit is a two-year, commercial boating permit issued to Swimming Truck LLC – aka Tahoe Duck Boats – issued July 29, 2010. It limits the boats to five trips a day per boat, seven days a week, in July and August, and to no more than three trips a day per vehicle three days a week in April, May, June, September and October. Tahoe Duck Tours paid an \$868.80 air quality mitigation fee and a \$1,000 monitoring fee.

The boats can launch only from Tahoe Keys Marina and pick up customers at the Stateline Transit Center, adjacent to Heavenly Village, and cannot enter any other body of water without additional review and approval from the TRPA. An additional memorandum of understating prohibits the boats from

going into other waters even when not operating as a business in order to prevent invasive weeds and species located elsewhere from entering Lake Tahoe.

The permit also requires the daily cleaning and maintenance and the removal of all aquatic vegetation prior to entering and exiting the lake, and says the boats are subject to random inspections.

“As part of the permitting process they completed an environmental check list and we did not identify any impacts,” said Ken Kasman, shorezone coordinator for the TRPA, who was involved in issuing Tahoe Duck Boats permit.

The daily cleaning, said Kasman, involves washing the entire vehicle including the undercarriage, vacuuming the entire system including the bilge pump and applying a degreaser.

“They have spent considerable time cleaning the vehicles and making sure there is no loose grease,” he said.

Kasman also said the boats launch from one of the busiest marinas at the lake, where trailers for other boats haul in fine sediment as well.

“It’s unfair to specifically call these guys out,” Kasman said. “They’re not creating any significant impact.”

The boat operator is an “excellent partner in fighting the spread of aquatic invasive species in Lake Tahoe,” according to Ted Thayer, TRPA’s aquatic invasive species program manager. In addition to cleaning the boat of milfoil, which is mandatory, and using vegetable oil on the boat, which is not, Tahoe Duck Boats makes TRPA educational material on invasive species available and educates passengers about the issue during the ride, said Thayer.

“They have been very good partners and stewards of the lake,” Thayer said in an email to *Lake Tahoe News*.

Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board has no jurisdiction over the boats.

“We don’t regulate boats, but we do regulate the marinas,” said Lauri Kemper, assistant executive officer at the California agency. “The marinas are obligated to report to us.”

Kemper said she has received no complaints, either officially or anecdotally from the public, about the boats.

The boats have been nearly full all summer and hired for a couple additional private parties, said Kearney, but business has slowed down in the last week. The boats currently run Monday through Friday at 11am, 1pm and 3pm, and Saturday and Sunday hourly from 11am to 4pm. After Labor Day, the schedule will be reduced to Wednesday through Sunday, three times a day, until the end of September.

Tickets are \$30 for adults, \$27 for seniors and active duty personnel, \$19 for children older than 3, and \$8 for children under 3 years old.

Garridos deny involvement in disappearance of Bay Area girl

By Eric Kurhi, Oakland Tribune

HAYWARD — Nearly two years after Hayward police mounted a major search of the property near Antioch belonging to Phillip and Nancy Garrido in hopes of finding clues related to the disappearance of Michaela Garecht, investigators finally

talked to the couple, who maintained their innocence.

Investigators spoke with each of the Garridos for more than two hours last week.

“It was nothing earth-shattering,” Sgt. Corey Quinn said. “Both denied having anything to do with Michaela’s disappearance.”

Philip Garrido, a twice-convicted kidnapper and rapist, previously told El Dorado County investigators that while he is responsible for at least three more abductions and dozens of date rapes, he had nothing to do with the high-profile abduction of 9-year-old Michaela in 1988.

Hayward investigators remain interested, however, and plan to look at evidence taken from the Garridos’ compound in the next week and to conduct more interviews with the pair.

Shortly after Jaycee Dugard surfaced in August 2009, police from various agencies converged on the Garridos’ compound, where Dugard was held for 18 years.

Hayward police conducted what was called the most extensive search in the history of the department because of strong similarities to the 1988 disappearance of Michaela, snatched from a Hayward grocery store’s parking lot.

Read the whole story

Placerville council members

calling for mayor to resign

By Carlos Alcalá and Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

A majority of Placerville City Council members are calling on Mayor David Machado to step down in the wake of his arrest Thursday on felony charges connected with his property holdings in the city.

In addition, officials have amended the agenda for Tuesday's meeting to consider removing Machado from the position of mayor and requesting him to take an indefinite leave from the City Council.

"The City neither condones nor ignores activity such as that spelled out in the District Attorney's Complaint," according to a statement released Friday by City Manager Cleve Morris.

The complaint alleges that Machado hid ownership of property within the city's redevelopment zone in violation of disclosure laws. It also said he did unpermitted work on his properties within the city and attempted, in some cases, to cover that up.

The DA's criminal complaint puts the allegations into two counts – one of perjury, one of conspiracy – backed by 30 enumerated "overt acts" Machado is alleged to have committed.

It is not known whether Machado, 53, has secured legal representation, and he has not responded to phone calls or visits to his home address.

Read the whole story

Budget uncertainty hits geothermal sector

By Jason Hildago, Reno Gazette-Journal

The highly-polarized budget debate combined with wishy-washy renewable energy policy from Washington, D.C., were identified as key threats to the speedy development of the U.S. clean economy, said experts at a national geothermal conference in Reno.

The need to pare an extra \$1.2 trillion from the federal budget especially raised concerns at the Geothermal Energy Association's National Geothermal Summit, largely because of its potential impact on federal tax credits and incentives currently available for renewable energy projects.

These include temporary tax credits and loan guarantees that developers consider essential in kick-starting expensive and oftentimes high-risk projects.

"The debt ceiling and debt reduction issue in Washington, D.C., really sucked the oxygen out of many firms," said Jonathan Weisgall, vice-president of legislative and regulatory affairs for MidAmerican Energy Holdings Co. "It is really the overriding issue that will trickle to all parts of the economy, including renewables."

The concern was echoed by Keith Martin, a partner with international law firm Chadbourne and Park, LLC.

"Think about what was going on just a year ago – there was incredible euphoria about renewables," Martin said. "Now, renewable folks are trying to stay in the shadows while trying to find "» which budgets will get cut (by Congress). They're hoping to come out into the daylight next year and push an extension for these incentives."

S. Tahoe retirees grapple with potential spike in health care

Publisher's note: *This is the second of a two-part series about South Lake Tahoe's fiscal situation.*

By Kathryn Reed

Fixed incomes and health care payments are beginning to clash for South Lake Tahoe retirees.

As retirees, most of their retirement checks are set. Not so when it comes to health care benefits. They get what employees get. And this may mean they could be paying more as of Oct. 1.



While discussions sputter along between city negotiators and the seven collective bargaining units, the retirees are making noise. They want a seat at the table, but are being denied. They say in past years they've been able to have a voice, but say City Manager Tony O'Rourke is denying them that opportunity now.

"As to why the retirees are not at the table: 1. It is not in the seven collective bargaining MOUs. 2. It is exclusive bargaining right of the city and current employees to amend the health plan and cost structure. 3. If retirees were at the table, it is only fair city taxpayers were also there since they ultimately pay for all our health care costs," O'Rourke

told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Retirees have three representatives residing in Lake Tahoe – none allowed a seat at the table.

Lake Tahoe News obtained the following message from a 28-year city employee retired for 16 years who sent the following email to O'Rourke, "What is being proposed will put some of us on welfare. The cost of insurance has not gone up very much for the city and to try to increase our deductible by 300 percent for individual and 450 percent for family and a 400 percent increase in individual out of pocket and a 600 percent increase in family out of pocket. My retirement pension is \$28,000 per year. We will have to go on welfare. Please don't do this to the retirees. Those that are working can still plan for their future. I'm 70 years old and I cannot; my future was planned 16 years ago and now you're trying to kill me."

Retirees are subject to the same health care as employees – so if employees agree to changes, retirees have no choice.

The current deductible for retirees is \$250 and the city is looking at increasing it to \$750. Now they must pay \$1,000 out of pocket, with the possibility of that increasing to \$4,000.

"I wouldn't have left if I knew they were going to take the medical away," said Mike Pollack, who worked for the public works department from 1982-2009. "I have no idea what the recourse is but go back to work."

Retirees have told *Lake Tahoe News* they are looking into their legal options. With one of them being a retired city attorney, they have connections.

One thing several retirees told *Lake Tahoe News* is they sacrificed pay increase with the promise of premium health benefits upon retirement.

"When we retired we expected no changes in our benefits. We

had a realistic expectation that what we went out with, we would keep,” Candy Morganson, who worked as a secretary for the fire department, and building and safety from October 1979 to December 2004, said. “What happened is the day you walk out the door they hand you a piece of paper and they force you to sign it. Whatever current employees have, you get, too.”

Many who talked to *Lake Tahoe News* believed they were retiring with a defined health benefit that could not be changed. That’s not the case.

“It’s not my fault they don’t have the money,” Al Turner said. He blames previous councils and city managers for their financial choices as to why there isn’t money now to pay for retiree benefits.

Turner worked for the city in the roads department for nearly 30 years, having retired in April 2004.

He said his colleagues gave up about 12 percent worth of raises to have the city pick up the pension and health care costs.

“Don’t tell me I’m not paying for it,” Turner said.

To reel in costs, a previous City Council passed a policy that says anyone hired after Jan. 1, 2008, will not receive health benefits from the city upon retirement.

Currently, 134 retirees are on the city’s health care plan and 188 employees use it.

The following is an example of a vesting schedule as provided by the city:

Less than 10 years: employee pays 100 percent, city pays zero.

More than 10, less than 15: employee pays 75 percent, city 25 percent.

More than 15, less than 20: employee pays 50 percent, city 50 percent.

More than 20, less than 25: employee pays 25 percent, city pays 75 percent.

More than 25: employee pays zero percent, city pays 100 percent.

The city is self-insured. The last time the city went out for a request for proposal for health insurance was in 2010.

For 2011-12, the city has budgeted \$1,989,712 for retiree health benefits. Health costs are estimated to increase between 4 to 5 percent annually over the next five years, according to the city.

“Assuming a middle point, 4.5 percent increase, then the total amount estimated for the next five years would be \$10,885,137,” city spokeswoman Nancy Kerry said.

She broke down the figures as follows:

- Fiscal year 2011-12 \$1,989,712
- FY 2012-13 \$2,079,249
- FY 2013-14 \$2,172,815
- FY 2014-15 \$2,270,592
- FY 2015-16 \$2,372,769.

Retirees have their own budgets, costs and stories to share.

The following is from Morganson:

“Last August, my husband suffered a life-threatening medical emergency requiring emergency bilateral brain surgery. He spent a combined total of seven weeks in three different hospitals in Reno and San Francisco – nine days in ICU at

Renown Medical Center, a month at Tahoe Pacific Hospital (respiratory rehab) as he required a tracheotomy immediately post-op as he could no longer breath without assistance, and then two weeks in the acute rehab section for TBI at St. Francis Hospital in San Francisco. As you can imagine, the costs for this care were staggering. This doesn't count the cost of the ALS ambulance transport from Reno to San Francisco and from San Francisco back home in Incline Village.

"While Medicare picked up a substantial portion of the costs after their deductible, the city insurance also picked up the balance after applying deductibles. Luckily I had the few thousand dollars to handle that. If the same occurred with the newly proposed cuts in coverage/increased co-pay and 'stop loss' amounts, the result would be financially devastating. As retirees, we exist on a fixed income with very little 'wiggle room' in our budget.

"While nobody can plan for a catastrophic event such we experienced, it only takes once to financially devastate a family. That is yet another reason we retirees want our medical coverage – to remain as it was when we retired and as we were led to believed it would, at least until the day each of us retired and were forced to sign the form I described to you. I think I would be safe to say that retirees would have no problem if current employees want to impose these increased costs on themselves, but we want the city to honor it obligation to us retirees & leave our medical benefits alone."

When Tom Fay started with the city he made \$1.85 an hour. By the time he left in 1996 he was making \$19/hour as street superintendent of public works. His pension is less than \$28,000 a year, he said.

"We gave up several years of raises to get the medical package," Fay said. "The majority of retirees were there when the salaries were low. Medical benefits were the asset they were looking forward to."

May Ray Fire containment now expected on Sunday

Updated 10:45pm Aug. 19

By Jeff DeLong, Reno Gazette-Journal

Full containment for the 3,895-acre wildfire in Douglas County has been pushed back to Sunday, Sierra Front fire responders report Friday night. Now at 85 percent containment, the fire continued to smolder Friday, officials said.

Two 15-year-old boys suspected of starting a wildfire that burned more than five square miles southeast of Gardnerville will remain in detention until a hearing can be held.

District Judge David Gamble denied requests by defense lawyers Thursday to place the teenagers under house arrest or in the custody of their parents.

Defense lawyers said that the Ray May Fire, which has an estimated 3,895 acres, was an accident that went terribly wrong. Officials said the teenagers built a campfire near a makeshift fort and didn't properly extinguish it.

But prosecutors said that one of the boys allegedly admitted starting other fires.

KRNV News 4 reported that Gamble offered to recuse himself because he lived in the fire area, but both the prosecution and defense opted to keep him on the case.

The Ray May Fire was 85 percent contained Friday night, and fire crews expected to have a line completely around the fire by Sunday, two days later than originally estimated earlier in

the week. The fire continued to creep and smolder on Friday, Sierra Front fire responders said.

Seven structures burned, including one unoccupied dwelling owned by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, a seasonal guest house on private land, and five outbuildings.

Pinenut Road was closed for everyone except residents Friday.

Read the whole story

Changes to worker visas could affect ski industry

By Nancy Lofholm, Denver Post

Sen. Mark Udall of Colorado has added his voice to mounting pressure on the State Department to improve oversight of a 50-year-old foreign-exchange visitor program that has morphed into a conduit for guest workers and is drawing fire for siphoning jobs from American workers.

The Democrat wrote to Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton last week asking her to outline what steps the department has taken to end misuse of the J visa program that has more than 350,000 foreign workers in U.S. jobs.

The J visa program was created to promote cultural and educational exchange as a tool to enhance diplomatic ties abroad. In its inaugural year, about 50,000 visas were issued under the program. The program, with 16 classes of J visas, has participants in a wide variety of occupations, including au pair work, farm labor and seasonal jobs at national parks, ski resorts, hotels and restaurants.

Colorado leads the country in numbers of foreign students working on J-1 visas, the type that bring foreign college students to America to fill seasonal jobs for four-month periods.

Udall's letter to Clinton was prompted by a recent *Denver Post* article about J-1 visas and by three independent and governmental reports that have outlined problems in the program.

"Mark is following up on reports of weak oversight of the program. He's asking for a review to see what measures the State Department has taken to ensure that the proper guidelines are being upheld for hiring through the J visa visitors program and that American workers are not inadvertently hurt," said Udall spokeswoman Tara Trujillo.

Read the whole story

Steamy prospects for Reno during national geothermal summit

By Jason Hildago, Reno Gazette-Journal

It's a sunny, summer day in August, and several employees inside a control room are clearly feeling the heat in more ways than one.

As workers at Ormat Technologies' Steamboat Geothermal Power Plant Complex in Reno, the control room guys are charged with overseeing an operation that generates 89 megawatts of energy – enough electricity to support the entire residential load of

Reno.

The state-of-the-art equipment in the room also allows the employees to monitor other Ormat operations, including a waste heat system that creates energy by harnessing excess heat from a natural gas pipeline that runs from Canada to Chicago.

Most of the heat today, however, is coming from several pairs of inquisitive eyes right behind the employees. The visitors are part of several group tours arranged Tuesday as part of the Geothermal Energy Association's first National Geothermal Summit. One pair of those inquisitive eyes belongs to Karl Gawell, executive director of the association.

For Gawell, having attendees – including policy makers – see a geothermal plant up close and personal is critical when it comes to promoting the technology. The Steamboat facility is particularly special because it is right next to a metropolitan area, Gawell said.

“It's important for people to see that geothermal can be a good neighbor,” said Gawell from a hill overlooking the complex during another leg of the tour. “If you look down, you can see a geothermal plant right there, but you can also see a shopping mall across the road behind it. Most people don't even know there's a plant here. Geothermal uses the smallest amount of land for the amount of electricity it generates.”

Read the whole story

Push Fitness and Barton talks

fall through

Barton Health and Push Fitness have been discussing the possibility of the health care provider acquiring the South Lake Tahoe gym.



However, Barton's board of directors on Aug. 16 voted not to go forward with the purchase.

"We can't disclose why we were looking into it. We filed a non-disclosure statement with Push," Rebecca Wass, spokeswoman for Barton, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Push owner Tim Christenson said the gym is not for sale.

Barton would not reveal if it will be looking at other gyms on the South Shore to buy or if it was the prime piece of real estate on Highway 50 that it was more interested in.

– Kathryn Reed