Rain, snow don’t mean an end to fire danger – yet

By Sam Stanton and Nashelly Chavez, Sacramento Bee

Rain and snowfall that swept over Northern California on Saturday morning hold the promise of relief from the deadly fire season that ravaged the state this year, but fire officials say it is far too early to believe the danger of more wildfires has passed.

“It just continues on,” CalFire spokesman Scott McLean said of the possibility of more fires in the coming months, despite the start of the fall rains. “Let’s see what the rains bring. Definitely, it will slow things down, but it will not stop.”

So far this year, CalFire says it has battled 6,405 blazes that consumed more than 556,090 acres, more than double the acreage that burned through the same time last year. Overall, 1.1 million acres – more than 1,718 square miles – burned between CalFire areas and U.S. Forest Service territory in the state. The carnage, as usual, was worst in October, when devastation hit Santa Rosa, Loma Rica and Redwood Valley and other communities and killed at least 43 people.

Read the whole story

Double homicide in Kings Beach

Two people were killed in Kings Beach on Saturday.

Placer County sheriff's deputies were called to the 8400 block of Trout Avenue at 4pm Nov. 4 because of shots fired. When they got there a man and woman were found shot to death.

"The investigation revealed that this was related to a neighbor dispute," deputies said in a press release.

Deputies are not saying how many people have been detained or anything about them. The names of the deceased have also not been released.

The investigation is ongoing.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

As wildfires raged, insurers sent in private firefighters

By Leslie Scism, Wall Street Journal

During the worst of last month's wildfires in Northern California, Dick Fredericks got a phone call that passed on "some magical words": His house was safe.

The message from a private firefighting service hired by his home insurer, Chubb Ltd., was accompanied by an email with some two dozen photos, including one of the service's firefighters pumping water from Fredericks's swimming pool to extinguish a brush fire on his Sonoma Valley property.

Increasingly, insurance carriers are finding wildfires, such as those in California, are an opportunity to provide protection beyond what most people get through publicly funded fire fighting. Some insurers say they typically get new

customers when homeowners see the special treatment received by neighbors during big fires.

The services are complimentary to policyholders in certain ZIP codes or states that are prone to wildfires. Some insurers require policyholders to enroll in the programs in advance, to give permission for workers to access the property and to obtain contact information.

Read the whole story

Study: Climate change sucks moisture from West

By Stuart Leavenworth, Sacramento Bee

The Trump administration released a sweeping report Friday that pegged man-made climate change to droughts and wildfires in California and the West, but for reasons one may not expect.

Scientists have uncovered little evidence that climate change is a driver of reduced rainfall and snowfall in the region, including during the drought of 2001-2015. But studies have found strong links that higher temperatures, caused by climate change, have reduced soil moisture in California and other states. That in turn has affected farm operations and dried out vegetation, creating fuel for wildfires.

“Much evidence is found for a human influence on surface soil moisture deficits due to increased evapotranspiration caused by higher temperatures,” said the congressionally mandated National Climate Assessment, an annual review of scientific

literature on climate change affecting the United States.

Read the whole story

Placer County to take over some TRPA permitting

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board voted unanimously to increase the number of permit types Placer County can process on the bi-state regulatory organization's behalf.

This should help people in terms of time and with transportation costs.

Beginning in spring 2018, the county Community Development Resource Agency in Tahoe City will offer a one-stop shop to customers requiring TRPA permits for certain commercial, tourist and mixed-used projects located in the Tahoe basin. The move will allow county staff to shepherd projects through the entire project review process – from conceptual project design, permitting and inspections – priming staff for the busy summer construction season.

Under a new memorandum of understanding between Placer and TRPA, the county will now be able to issue "TRPA qualified exempt" permits for simpler commercial, tourist- and recreation-related projects as well as continue to issue permits for residential projects from new construction to additions and remodels.

TRPA continues to process permits for lakefront developments, projects requiring scenic analysis or projects requiring an

environmental impact statement.

Quarterly gains posted by El Dorado Savings Bank

El Dorado Savings Bank's third quarter profits increased $876,717 from 2016 to $3,696,981.

"The continued strong profits reflect the strong performance of the loan and investment portfolios," CEO George L. Cook Jr. said in a statement.

The bank operates 35 branches, including in South Lake Tahoe.

El Dorado ended the quarter with $2.178 billion in total assets and savings deposits of $1.94 billion.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

What happens to fire retardant-soaked crops?

By Julie Cart, CALmatters

The full extent of the damage from the northern California wildfires that killed 43 people and destroyed 8,400 homes is still being tallied. The devastation left an obvious scar, but

not all the damage is visible.

Among the assessments still to be made is what impact millions of gallons of fire retardant—essentially a potent fertilizer—may have on carefully tended plants and soils.

Saved by timing, nearly 80 percent of the renowned wine region's grapes had been harvested when the multiple fires started in early October. And for the most part, the blazes did not linger at the vineyards, which are kept free of grasses and other fire-devouring fuels.

But there was collateral damage: bright red slathers of fire retardant dropped from the state's fleet of supertankers. In one week, more than 2 million gallons of retardant were dropped in California—a record, according to Cal Fire, the state firefighting agency.

"We are always mindful of where we are trying to drop aerial fire retardant," said Chris Jurasek, the CalFire aviation supervisor who directed many of the drops. "It's always in our mind to try and alleviate contacting anything other than fire."

CalFire has the largest aerial firefighting fleet in the world. As planes become increasingly central to fighting fires in California, more and more retardant is served up.

On one day during the recent fires, Oct. 12, crews loaded nearly 700 gallons of retardant a minute from dawn to dusk to help slow the fire, according to CalFire.

By way of comparison: The state's largest aviation facility, near Sacramento, pumped 1.7 million gallons of retardant into firefighting tankers in 2016. The base has already used more than 4 million gallons so far this year.

The retardant, called Phos-Chek, contains ammonium phosphate, a fertilizer. It also includes chemicals to regulate how the

slurry drops, emulsifiers that render it gooey so it sticks to targets, and a coloring agent so air crews can track what they've dropped. For the most part, the ingredients are disclosed to CalFire by the Phos-Chekmanufacturer, ICL-Performance Products, LP.

But the entire formula is not made public. George Matousek, an ICL chemist who helped formulate the retardant, said the precise recipe is a trade secret but "all products in Phos-Chek are food-grade or better."

The chemicals are mixed with water and are generally harmless to humans and most animals, according to the company. But retardants are known to be toxic to fish, so state and national fire-fighting agencies prohibit drops within 300 feet of water sources.

But as Western wildfires increasingly move out of forests and into developed areas, firefighters have less wiggle room to target their drops.

When a converted 747 jetliner is lining up to release nearly 20,000 gallons of retardant, there's no guarantee of precision. Pilots are often guided away from water sources and landscapes containing plants that are endangered or otherwise protected by law, using retardant avoidance maps published by the U.S. Forest Service.

It's an issue that's taken seriously by fire-fighting agencies. Biologists say that a sudden dump of nutrients in soils can encourage the growth of non-native or invasive plants.

"There is a precedent for concern about soil chemistry," said Andy Stahl, executive director of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics, a watchdog group made up of Forest Service employees and others.

Improving soil productivity "would allow invasive plants that

are better able to utilize these nutrients (to) crowd out natives.”How those interactions might play out in carefully curated vineyards is not known. Winemakers are famously fussy about soil: It’s what imparts the terroir that gives wines their unique characteristics.

Some vintners choose not to use fertilizers of any kind.

“A lot of time and effort is put into that soil,” said Andrew Walker, a geneticist at the University of California, Davis’ Department of Viticulture and Enology, which is devoted to all things wine-making. Fertilizers may be altogether undesirable, he said.

North Coast vintners “make expensive wines. They work on quality rather than quantity. They don’t necessarily want excessive vine growth.”

Walker said not much is known about potential effects of retardants on commercial crops. Previous blazes have raced out of wildlands and into agricultural lands, destroying fruit and nut orchards, hay fields and, increasingly, California’s highly lucrative cannabis plantations. Farmers of such crops have specific guidelines for fertilizing their plants.

Academics and researchers are beginning to study the issue—a good thing, Matousek said. “It’s something that’s going to come up more often.”The Napa County Agricultural Commissioner did not return phone calls for comment.

The Wine Institute, an advocacy group for 1,000 wineries and business in California, declined to comment. A representative of a regional cannabis-growing association did not respond to a request for comment.

But the Napa County Health and Human Services Agency posted an online warning earlier this month. It stated that although there is little danger in ingesting produce when retardant is present, it’s to be avoided.

“Individuals are advised against consuming fruits and vegetables from home gardens to which retardant may have been applied, or from areas in wildlands where residues are visible,” the agency said.

“In addition to avoiding consuming food items with visible residues, the fertilizer component of the retardants may lead to temporary increases in the nitrate content of soils in areas of application.” Walker said plants take in chemicals in soils, but they also can absorb some chemicals to no ill effect.

Still, Dennis Hulbert, a retired regional aviation manager for the U.S. Forest Service who oversaw firefighting action in California, said retardants are relied upon too much by overwhelmed fire managers.

Hulbert said he spent 39 years ordering retardant drops without knowing much about the potential long-term implications. “This is 50-year-old technology,” he said. “I’m not sure it’s a good thing.”

Cal Fire’s Jurasek, for his part, said the tankers and their loads of retardant were instrumental in quenching the recent fires. The wineries will recover, he said. As for the possibility of lingering problems in soils and plants, he said, “I do not have any concerns.”

CALmatters.org is a nonprofit, nonpartisan media venture explaining California policies and politics.

Kirkwood looking for power supplier

By Kathryn Reed

Kirkwood – the residents, resort and other commercial entities – may soon have a new provider of power.

For years the area straddling Alpine, Amador and El Dorado counties had a diesel plant. That all changed three years ago this month when Kirkwood Meadows Public Utility District completed the construction of a transmission line connecting Kirkwood to the CAISO-controlled electric grid at PG&E's Salt Springs substation.

"Power is purchased through an independent energy supplier based on load forecasts provided by KMPUD, with actual usage monitored by CAISO," Brandi Benson, assistant manager of operations for KMPUD, told *Lake Tahoe News.*

KMPUD is in the process of soliciting bids for "a single counter-party to provide a full array of energy wholesale services including, but not limited to: power procurement, trading and hedging; load forecasting and scheduling; and CAISO interface, SC services and settlement activities."

KMPUD has 730 customers, with the largest being the ski resort. It owns the 28.8-mile power line connecting the distribution system to the transmission system at Salt Springs.

Kirkwood Meadows still maintains a diesel plant as backup.

KMPUD also provides the community's water supply, waste water, fire services, mosquito abatement, propane service, solid waste management, parks and recreational facilities, and snow removal.

General aviation in rural Nevada an economic driver



Minden’s airport continues to grow. Photo/LTN file

By Megg Mueller, Nevada Magazine

Nevada is the land of wide-open space. Miles of highway, endless valleys, and vistas are the stuff roadtrippers dream about. Some travelers to the Silver State, however, don’t need any roads. Certain intrepid sightseers prefer to do their traveling with a little altitude.

Sure, there’s McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas, Reno-Tahoe International in Reno, and Elko Regional Airport in Elko, but because there are only three airports to offer commercial service in and out of the state, that leaves a lot of ground to cover.

For small aircraft owners—those who fly in what is called the general aviation (GA) category—there are 47 public-use airports in Nevada, with many other private airports and landing strips spread across the state. That is a lot of

access to Nevada’s great wide open.

Read the whole story

Kings Beach duo suspects in Truckee crimes

Two Kings Beach residents were arrested Oct. 31 on myriad charges following the burglary of a home on Olympic Boulevard in Truckee the prior weekend.

Stewart DeVaney, 21, and Simon Wyss, 19, were arrested by Truckee police detectives at their home on charges including striking a woman across her forehead with the butt of a rifle, causing a serious laceration that needed more 25 staples to close, burglary, being armed in the commission of a felony, possession of stolen property, armed robbery, and narcotics charges.

On Oct. 28, a woman arrived at a friend’s home on Olympic Boulevard in Truckee where she was confronted by two men wearing ski masks and armed with rifles, according to officers. One of the men struck her with the butt of a rifle causing the laceration to her head. The two men then fled from the home, which appears to have contained a marijuana grow.

Police believe the suspects wanted to steal marijuana.

During the search of the suspects’ residence, detectives located one of the rifles that is believed to have been used in the assault. This rifle had been stolen in an earlier residential burglary. Jewelry, money, and narcotics that are suspected to have been stolen from the home were also located

and seized as evidence.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report