Senate passes major U.S. food safety legislation

By Andrew Zajac, Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON – After languishing for more than a year, a food-safety bill that has enjoyed strong bipartisan support passed the Senate on Tuesday, raising prospects for tougher and more extensive federal inspections and other safeguards.

The bill, which President Obama supports, still needs to be reconciled with differing provisions in legislation passed by the House in July 2009.

But the Senate action was cheered by advocates as a sign that the long delay could be nearing an end and that the nation's food-safety laws will receive their first major overhaul in decades.

Read the whole story

California not mailing tax booklets

By Mark Glover, Sacramento Bee

As more Californians file their taxes electronically, the state Franchise Tax Board said last week that it will no longer directly mail tax booklets to households.



The move will result in a cost savings of “at least $1 million,” the FTB said.

The state’s action comes on the heels of a similar announcement last month from the Internal Revenue Service, which said individual and business taxpayers will no longer receive paper federal income tax packages in the mail.

Like the state, the IRS attributed the change to an increase in e-filing, the availability of free filing options and the need to cut costs.

Read the whole story

Freezing would signal a warming trend in Lake Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

If things keep going like this, those who talk about the winter of 1952 may have competition when it comes to bragging. That winter, the onslaught of snow that brought the white stuff to the second story of homes and businesses in Lake Tahoe didn’t start until Jan. 11.

As the calendar flips to a new page tomorrow, with it goes a November for the record books.

The overnight low for Nov. 28 was minus 8 degrees in South Lake Tahoe. It broke the record of minus 6 degrees set in

1975. Records were also set that night in Tahoe City, Truckee, Portola, Markleeville, Bridgeport and Mammoth.



Icicles don't have a chance to melt with highs in the 30s. Photos/Kathryn Reed

When it comes to snow totals, more records. Daggett Pass (aka the top of Kingsbury Grade at 7,334 feet) in Stateline recorded 57 inches of snow for November. November 1989 had 22 inches – now the second snowiest November on record, though totals have only been kept at that location since the winter of 1988-89.

The National Weather Service in Reno just started keeping snow totals for South Lake Tahoe last winter. More than 50 inches have been recorded this month at Lake Tahoe Airport.

Tahoe City has come in with 70.5 inches this November and still had 32 inches at the dam on Monday.

“It’s definitely in the top 5 to 10 percent of snowiest Novembers ever,” Dawn Fishler, meteorologist with the Weather Service in Reno, said of the region. “We just got in a good pattern.”

What’s next?

How this section of the Sierra Nevada sits the weather phenomena known as La Nina and El Nino don't mean a lot. This is because the region is on the cusp of those systems. So, while the Bay Area is projected to have a dry, cold winter because of La Nina, the same cannot be predicted for Lake Tahoe.

Only four times in recorded history for this area has a La Nina followed a strong El Nino, according to Fishler. Two were dry, two were extremely wet – so history is not helping foretell the future of this winter.

To complicate matters for forecasters "the models have been all over the place," Fishler said.

The three main long-range models are run four times a day.

"Those are changing every single run," Fishler said. That's not normal.

It points to how four days ago the storm forecast for midweek looked strong, but by Monday the chance of snow for Wednesday had dwindled to 20 to 30 percent.

Those models are pointing to a wet weekend with snow down to 5,000 feet. But Fishler said with the lack of confidence in the models she wasn't about to commit to that forecast this many days in advance.

Temperatures should be rising, even though it was only supposed to be about 4 degrees as people woke up in the basin this morning. The overnight lows should warm up to be in the 20s, with daytime highs in the 40s for the week. By the weekend it's back to the teens overnight and highs in the 30s.

Water content is of importance with snowfall because that's what fills the reservoirs downstream. In Tahoe City every 11 inches of snow produced 1 inch of liquid; it was a 16:1 ratio in South Lake Tahoe and 20:1 at Daggett Summit.

What it all means

For most ski resorts, this is the earliest opening since 2004-05 when runs were open in October.

“It’s radically awesome,” is how Kirstin Cattell of Sierra-at-Tahoe described the conditions. “I was in the trees all week. You don’t usually get in the trees opening weekend. You have to use your brain. That lump is probably a rock.”

She described the snow as “light and dry.”

So much snow has dumped at Sierra that gates one and two of Huckleberry Canyon are open.

On the North Shore, Alpine was reporting this as the second snowiest November in the resort’s history – and that was before Mother Nature unleashed more snow Saturday.

Mt. Rose is reporting the shallowest base of Tahoe area resorts – 31 to 55 inches.

Still to open are Tahoe Donner Downhill and Homewood Mountain Resort – Dec. 10; Diamond Peak – Dec. 16; and Granlibakken (ski hill) – Dec. 17.

Sierra Avalanche Center is issuing a moderate warning for conditions as of Nov. 29.

Andy Chapman with the North Lake Tahoe Resort Association said this was the strongest Thanksgiving weekend in the last decade, maybe the last 15 years, in terms of visitors.

“We haven’t had this type of product available in quite some time,” Chapman said of the snow. “To me and many I talked to it was almost like the Christmas period, it was that busy.”

The North Shore is hoping to ride the tourism momentum that started last winter. The January-March 2010 hotel tax dollars collected in Placer County were the second highest for that

quarter since the county has charged the fee.

Chapman believes it’s the ability to attract the drive-up market from the Bay Area and Sacramento as well as the short fly market that is boding well for businesses.

The South Shore also noticed the phone starting to ring as the snow started to fly. With Heavenly being on wind hold several days, it was fortuitous that Kirkwood and Sierra fired up their lifts to give people in the South Lake area options for riding.

Carol Chaplin, executive director of Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, said she is hearing a buzz among skiers who are excited to be able to ski Heavenly, Sierra and Northstar this season with certain season passes because Vail Resorts bought the Truckee resort last month.

Besides ski resorts, lodging, restaurants and roads being busy with the early snowfall – the cold is keeping employees with heating businesses working around the clock.

Nixon’s on the South Shore and Clark Plumbing, which operates around the lake, barely had time to chat with *Lake Tahoe News* because customers kept calling. Frozen pipes and dirty furnaces are making life miserable for some people.

TJ Stewart of Clark said, “Keep the heat on to override the outside temperature.” He suggested 55 to 60 degrees as the low on a thermostat.

Another tip is to open cabinet doors when leaving for several days so heat in the house reaches the pipes.

Basic winter tips

• Shovel around the gas meter and don’t let snow pile up.

• Have plenty of flashlights – with working batteries.

• Stock up on canned goods before a storm just in case that semi doesn’t make it to the grocery store with a fresh supply.

• Keep a good supply of candles on hand.

• Don’t use propane or camping stoves indoors.

• Four-wheel drive does not mean being able to stop as though the conditions were clear and dry.

• Don’t go in the backcountry alone. Carry avalanche rescue equipment.

• Check your windshield wiper fluid.

• Carry a blanket, water, food, extra clothes, and a shovel – especially crossing a summit.

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Accidents slow traffic on Hwy. 50 in Douglas County

Updated Nov. 29 at 11:29am.

A single rollover accident near Round Hill early Monday morning temporarily reduced traffic to one lane. A crash a 8:44am occurred later at Bourne curve.

A Nevada Highway patrolman escorted cars headed east on Highway 50 around a particularly slick spot.

“We had a request for sand in that area. I suspect it was black ice in that case,” NHP Trooper Chuck Allen told *Lake Tahoe News* in regards to the first accident.

He said the driver sustained minor injuries.

The second accident involved a pickup pulling a trailer with a snowcat on top of the trailer. This vehicle collided with another one. West bound lanes were blocked. Traffic was rerouted into the east bound lane. Both drivers reported minor injuries.

Despite the slick roads during the four-day holiday weekend, the NHP reported eight accidents in Douglas County. Most were on Kingsbury Grade, a couple on Highway 50 and one on Highway 28.

– Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe to create admin time policy

By Kathryn Reed

When South Lake Tahoe City Manager Tony O'Rourke has his staff meeting today one topic on the agenda will be administrative time.

"I want directors to review who warrants it and make sure the hours are appropriate," O'Rourke said.

Some people are given 40 hours, others more than 100 in a year. Thirty-nine employees now qualify for admin time.

O’Rourke was unaware the city did not have a policy in place regarding this practice until *Lake Tahoe News* wrote about it earlier this month. Administrative time is for salaried employees as a sort of comp time.

But the problem is without a policy in place and it not being tracked by the folks in payroll, the abuses of admin time are unknown. It’s possible now for people to take the time without earning it. This means instead of taking sick time or vacation hours, they take this admin time and still have the other hours on the books. This would be a financial impact on the city.

O’Rourke said he wants to add a box that can be checked on timesheets to reflect the use of admin time. This in turn can be tracked to ensure people aren’t using more than they have been allocated and possibly snare anyone abusing the system.

When O’Rourke was hired this summer his original contract called for 120 hours of admin time. He dialed that back to 80.

“I can’t take all that time,” he said of the three weeks.

That’s the other concern of his – is whether the city can afford people to not work.

“How much can you allow people off even if they earned it?” he questions. With fewer employees and the ongoing furlough days, he questions how much admin time can be doled before the public isn’t served.

A temporary admin time policy was written in the early 1990s when Kerry Miller was city manager, but it was never adopted as formal policy. Since then, Human Resources Manager Janet Emmett has drafted a couple possible policies. But former City Manager Dave Jinkens never brought them forward for the City Council to adopt.

“Why this has been untouched for years is beyond me,” O’Rourke

said. “It’s an important housekeeping policy.”

It’s possible the council will be asked to address this Dec. 14. If not then, it will be on a January agenda.

Calif. on sidelines of latest gold rush, Nev. a definite player

By Dale Kasler, Sacramento Bee

California is being left behind by the new Gold Rush.



Despite sky-high prices and the state’s rich gold legacy, the industry here is mostly dormant. California trails the leading gold-producing state, Nevada, by a wide margin.

A California revival is hardly imminent. Companies trying to reopen old mines in Grass Valley and near Sutter Creek have slogged through years of red tape, and there are no guarantees of success. The Sutter Creek plan is at least a year away, while Grass Valley is several years from reopening.

Standing in the way: scarcity of capital and strict environmental standards.

There’s a cultural issue, too. Old mining towns still embrace their Gold Rush roots but have become havens for tourists and retirees. Some residents aren’t convinced that blasting through rock is compatible with boutiques or bed-and-

breakfasts.

Read the whole story

Search resumes for missing Reno hiker

By Channel 2 News

Search crews returned to the Galena Creek area Sunday looking for a hiker that disappeared a week ago.

Crews are looking for 55-year old Rick Gentry who reported himself lost while hiking last Sunday.

Foot teams and K-9 units set out on snowshoes to canvass the hills of Galena Creek Park in the morning.

This is the same area they were searching last week when bad weather forced them to suspend the search.

Read the whole story

Fire damages attic of S. Tahoe ski shop

The South Lake Tahoe Fire Department made quick work of a commercial structure fire in a ski rental shop Nov. 26. The fire at 1098 Ski Run Blvd. was located in the attic of a

single story commercial building.

The quick actions of the owner fire crews limited the damage to the attic space and did not affect any of the stock or operations in the shop. The cause of the fire was due to faulty electrical installation.

This fire had the potential to spread to adjacent properties and the recent snows made access to the building difficult, said SLTFD Division Chief Marty Scheuerman.

Units from South Lake Tahoe, Lake Valley and Tahoe Douglas responded.

Study: Billions more from tourism, fishing than oil

By Jennifer Dlouhy, Houston Chronicle

WASHINGTON – An environmental advocacy group says tourism and fishing deliver $204 billion annually to coastal economies along the Pacific, Atlantic and Florida Gulf shores – about four times the value of the estimated oil and gas that could be recovered every year from proposed offshore drilling nearby.

The study, prepared by Environment America, boils down the fierce and emotional fight over offshore drilling into a dollar-based analysis.

Michael Gravitz, the report's author, contends the numbers show that "the potential returns from offshore drilling are not worth the risk" of another oil spill that could contaminate reefs near Florida and salmon-rich Pacific waters.

“Our research makes it clear that clean beaches and oceans are worth much more than drilling for the last drops of oil off our coasts,” Gravitz added.

Oil and gas industry leaders have argued that the value of the actual commodities that can be extracted only shows part of the picture – and overlooks the added spending tied to offshore drilling activities, from the salaries of rig workers in Louisiana and Texas to the pipes built in Rust Belt manufacturing plants.

Read the whole story

Reno, Washoe County consider consolidating services

By Tammy Krikorian, Reno Gazette-Journal

The city of Reno and Washoe County are seeking residents’ input on whether the two local governments should combine services in information technology, human resources and purchasing.

Washoe County and Reno already share dozens of services through inter-local agreements, memorandums of understanding and consolidation.

The county, Reno, Sparks and Washoe County School District created a committee to study ways to share services. The first project focused on sharing IT, HR and purchasing. After a staff analysis, Washoe County and Reno decided to move forward and hired Matrix Consulting Group to analyze the feasibility of combining the services in a way that would improve service

and save money.

Read the whole story