Study: Livestock polluting Sierra water supply

By Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee

As director of the emergency room at the UC Davis Medical Center, Robert Derlet always wondered what made people sick.

Each summer, on hiking trips into the high Sierra, he brought that curiosity along, asking himself: Where do you get infections in the wilderness? The most obvious possibility, he believed, was the water.

Now, after 10 years of fieldwork and 4,500 miles of backpacking, Derlet knows for sure. What he has learned – after analyzing hundreds of samples dipped from backcountry lakes and streams –

Cattle near Bridgeport. Photo/Daryl L. Hunter

is that parts of the high Sierra are not nearly as pristine as they look.

Read the whole story

4% proposed STPUD rate hike comes with questions

By Kathryn Reed

When ratepayers in South Tahoe Public Utility District incurred a 4 percent hike in 2007 it generated about $668,000 in revenue. Salary and benefit increases that year for STPUD totaled about $750,000. When ratepayers incurred another 4 percent hike in 2008 it raised about $700,000, with the district spending about $1.7 million on salaries and benefits that year.

The district is proposing a rate hike of 4 percent that would take effect July 1 – the start of the fiscal year. No raises are expected for the more than 100 employees. The money generated is earmarked for capital improvement projects.

On May 6 at 6pm the board will conduct a public hearing on the 2010-11 budget at 1275 Meadow Crest Drive, South Lake Tahoe. The board will vote on the rate increase on the May 20 meeting that starts at 2pm.

That is also the last day the 17,000 ratepayers can submit comments about the proposal. If 50 percent plus one objects to the increase, the proposal dies per California Proposition 218. The board could also vote against it.

As of April 27 there were 66 objections. Two years ago the rate increase received 65 objections and there were more than 160, or less than 1 percent of the ratepayers, who objected three years ago.

"The thing that is the driving force for the increase is the capital improvement program for the next two years," South Tahoe PUD General Manager Richard Solbrig said. "The next two years there is a real glut of projects to get done. We need some cash upfront right away to take advantage of all of these programs."

Part of the urgency is matching dollars and low interest loan programs the district has received from the state and federal governments. Some of the money will be spent on installing water meters, some to upgrade the water flow for fire suppression and some to improve the 51-year-old wastewater treatment plant.

Board President Dale Rise believes a 4 percent rate increase is too much.

"I was hoping to convince the board of 2 percent," Rise said. "My problem is they want a 4 percent increase every year for the next 10 years."

If the rate hike were approved, the average household would pay an additional $8 per quarter or $32 a year. Rise is concerned about the cumulative affect of 4 percent hikes, pointing out that in three years it's more than $100 more a year that people would be paying for water and sewer each year compared to today's rates.

The district does its budget calculations on a 10-year cycle to project its current and anticipated needs.

"If we did zero percent this year and did 4 percent for the remaining nine years and did all the capital projects, we would have a deficiency in the ending balance," Solbrig said.

To that, Rise says perhaps some of the projects should be deferred.

If the 4 percent hike is not approved, Solbrig says the board will have to decide which capital improvement projects need to be shelved and/or approve other cost-cutting measures.

In the $40 million annual budget about one-third is used for capital improvements, one-third for maintenance and operations, and one-third for salaries and benefits.

The latter has caused several disgruntled ratepayers to voice their dissatisfaction with how the district spends ratepayers' money. The highest paid employee in the district is Solbrig, who makes $180,744 a year. The lowest wage is $16/hour. The average annual salary at the district is $75,474.

There are 100 workers who are represented by one union. The 15 managers operate under a memorandum of understanding with the district. The highest paid union worker makes about $95,000/year.

Below is the salary range for the 10 highest paid positions beneath the general manager. All are management positions.

Position	**Minimum**	**Maximum**
Assistant GM	$127,016	$162,108
CFO	$108,587	$138,588
Eng Dept Manager	$110,205	$140,652
Mgr of Field Ops	$102,213	$130,452
Principal Engineer	$99,157	$126,552
Mgr of Plant Ops	$99,157	$126,552

Human Resources	$90,215	$115,140								
Senior Engineer	$88,100	$112,440								
Hydrogeologist	$88,100	$112,440								
Land App Mgr	$88,100	$112,440								

Most employees in the district are at the highest level of the five-step range for their position, Solbrig said.

He and CFO Paul Hughes explained the large salary-benefit spike in 2008 was twofold. First, salaries were adjusted to bring STPUD employees inline with the state median for their respective positions. This was the first survey conducted since Solbrig started with the district in 1990. It was a board decision to pay the median salary. Second, the district switched to a wellness program that mandated employees get baseline exams. This meant more visits to doctors than would be normal.

“The district’s view is investing in the cost of the wellness program in a long-term investment. We expect to reap benefits for years to come,” Hughes said.

In the current budget the salary and benefits category is down 1 to 2 percent from the previous year because the health plan is working, Hughes said. The district is self-insured.

This is the last year of a four-year contract with the union. It’s anticipated an extension of one year will be agreed to a by all sides that will include zero raises.

The general manager and the chief financial officer defend the salary and benefits packages for the 115 employees of South Tahoe PUD.

“It’s easier to retain people when you pay a fair, livable wage. We need an adequately trained staff. We don’t have a high turnover rate,” Solbrig said. “We don’t want to be like the police and fire departments where at times they have been like a training ground."

Below are the cost of living adjustments for STPUD employees compared to the consumer price index:

Year	**COLA**	**CPI**
2009	2.0%	-1.3%
2008	3.8%	3.8%
2007	3.2%	3.2%
2006	2.5%	2.9%
2005	2.5%	3.1%
2004	2.5%	2.5%
2003	2.5%	1.1%
2002	2.5%	2.8%
2001	2.0%	3.2%
2000	2.0%	2.0%

Wages have been frozen. However, STPUD employees have not incurred furlough days like their brethren throughout the public and private sectors. Nor have they had salary reductions since the recession hit.

Solbrig said the district maintains the staff it needs. He said when more construction was going on in Lake Tahoe the district hired a consultant or paid overtime to handle the new connections.

Solbrig said the maintenance and operations budget has been trimmed some and that grants are continuously being sought so ratepayers don't foot as much of the bill.

He said the staff and board have not identified what services could be cut and still have public health and safety issues addressed.

“What work are we not going to do if we have people on furlough?” Solbrig asked. “Are we going to reduce service? If your water is off, are you willing for us to get to you in a couple days?”

Harrah’s reports nearly $200 million quarterly loss

By Steve Green, Las Vegas Sun

Harrah’s Entertainment Inc. today reported a first quarter loss on lower revenue as the recession continued to reduce spending at its big Las Vegas Strip resorts.

The company said it lost $195.6 million vs. a loss in the year-ago first quarter of $132.7 million as revenue fell 2.9 percent to $2.188 billion.

“Revenue fell due primarily to the continuing impact of the recession on customers’ discretionary spending and reduced aggregate demand, which continued to pressure average daily room rates,” Harrah’s said in today’s earnings report.

Read the whole story

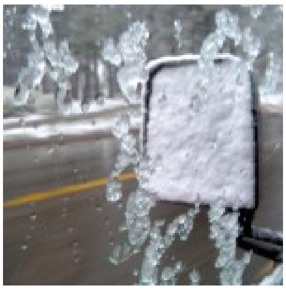
Winter weather about to descend on Lake Tahoe

Updated April 27 1:04pm.

By Kathryn Reed

Summer, the other season Lake Tahoe has besides winter, is 55 days away, according to the calendar.

That must mean winter is still here. To confirm that fact, the National Weather Service has issued a winter weather advisory from 5pm today through 9am Wednesday for elevations above 7,000 feet. Expect snow and blowing snow during those 16 hours as the winds pick up.



Driving may be interesting on mountain roads later today. Photo/Kathryn Reed

A wind advisory in affect for Lake Tahoe and many roads in the basin as well as Highway 395. The Weather Service says Highway 89 could be the most precarious today, with cross winds making travel dicey.

High winds Monday night into Tuesday morning kept many residents in the region awake. Trees are down in several areas, including one into a house on Washington Avenue near Third Street in South Lake Tahoe.

Wind has also taken out power lines in several locations. Lights have been flickering on and off for hours in the basin. Expect much of the same for the rest of Tuesday.

About 20 customers were without power from 3-9am today in the Cascade Lake area on the South Shore when a tree went into a line. Pockets of the Al Tahoe and Heavenly neighborhoods are without power still at 1pm.

A small outage also is being reported in Truckee.

Fay Anderson, spokeswoman with NV Energy, said the more significant outages have been in Reno and valley areas.

Keep candles and flashlights on hand in case the power goes out completely.

Reno-Tahoe International Airport is reporting delays.

First the rain will come, followed by snow later this afternoon. Forecasters say the heaviest snow will be between 5 and 10 tonight.

Expect to shovel 2-5 inches below 7,000 feet and 5-10 inches above that elevation.

Chain controls are predicted, as well as slick roads.

Don’t put away the shovel because snow is in the forecast for the rest of the week.

The sun is expected to return for the weekend, when highs will be in the 40s on Saturday and 50s on Sunday. Until then, expect highs in the 30s and lows in the 20s.

South Tahoe prevails in court to get taxes from The Block

Eneliko Smith, one of the partners in opening the The Block hotel in South Lake Tahoe, pleaded no contest to one count of felony theft in El Dorado County Superior Court for not paying the hotel tax to the city.

The investigation began in March 2008 when the police department received multiple disturbance calls related to the snowboarder oriented hotel near Stateline and reports from the city Finance Department that The Block was not paying TOT as required. Officer Mark Hounsell led the investigation and coordinated with various city departments and the District Attorney’s Office.

By December 2008 The Block and Cedar Lodge were closed.

Smith had opened the hotels a few years earlier with professional snowboarder Marco Frank Montoya. The Block in its brief heyday was featured in a reality television show on the G4 network.

Part of Smith’s plea agreement is he will be on felony probation for three years and must make full restitution to the city. After the first year of probation if he abides by the terms and makes full restitution to the city, the charge may be reduced to a misdemeanor theft, according to documents signed Friday.

A restitution hearing is scheduled for June 8 to determine the amount to be paid to South Lake Tahoe. The total amount being requested by the city including embezzled TOT taxes, late fees and interest is estimated to be about $200,000.

Despite his troubled past with The Block and Cedar Lodge, both of which are in decay, Smith wants to be a player in other resort towns. Click here for that story.

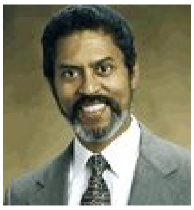
LTCC president wants to leave; he’s interviewing

Updated April 27 8:23am.

By Kathryn Reed

If Lake Tahoe Community College President Paul Killpatrick has his way, he won’t complete his three-year contract that expires in summer 2011.

Killpatrick is one of four finalists for the president’s job at Green River Community College in Auburn, Wash.



Paul Killpatrick

A decision on that job is not expected until early May. Finalists will be interviewed the first week of May.

Killpatrick told *Lake Tahoe News* on Tuesday morning that when the Green River job came open he jumped at the chance to apply because he and his wife would like to return to the Northwest where they've lived for 30 years, and their children and grandchildren live.

"It's no reflection of (LTCC) or the community," Killpatrick said of his desire to move on. "It's been a positive experience."

Killpatrick called board President Kerry David to tell him about the possibility of his leaving South Lake Tahoe's two-year institution.

"I know Paul has not felt as though he has been a proper fit. He is from the Northwest and has roots there," David said. "It's not an easy transition to follow in the shadow of long tenured leaders."

Killpatrick is the third president the college has had since opening more than 30 years ago.

Killpatrick has been criticized by some for not being a better fund-raiser since arriving here in summer 2008. David, who is also on the college's foundation board, said Killpatrick has planted seeds and that in this economy raising money is near impossible.

David anticipates the board will release Killpatrick from the contract when he gets another job.

Asked if he thought Killpatrick would be able to continue to his job at LTCC when everyone knows he is interviewing, David said yes. He also said the board is not likely to ask him to leave before he secures another position.

"In our economic situation we are not in a position to afford to try to make that happen sooner rather than later," David said.

Killpatrick said if he does not get the job he is a finalist for or one of the others he's applied for, he will continue to do the job in Tahoe, with possible mid-year budget cuts still something that will have to be tackled.

David credits Killpatrick with working in difficult financial times that have involved cutbacks at the college as the state continuously wrestles with deficits.

“While we have had to undergo cuts, he has participated in leading us through those troubled waters,” David said.

The board’s first order of business it hire a vice president of Academic Affairs and Student Services. Two finalists will be interviewed Friday. A decision should be made in early May.

NV Energy posts quarterly net loss

NV Energy Inc. (NYSE: NVE) today announced a consolidated net loss of $1.7 million, or 1 cent per share, for the quarter ended March 31, 2010, compared with a consolidated net loss of $22.2 million, or 9 cents per share, for the quarter ended March 31, 2009.

The improvement in the first quarter 2010 versus the first quarter 2009 was due to an increase in rates as a result of the southern Nevada utility’s general rate case, effective on July 1, 2009.

NV Energy’s two utilities contributed gross margin of $304.9 million in the first quarter 2010, $21 million higher than the first quarter 2009.

“Much of the first quarter-to-quarter improvement is attributable to our investments in new generating facilities in southern Nevada that are now included in rates," said Michael Yackira, president and chief executive officer of NV Energy.

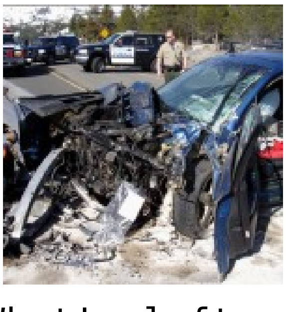
Headquartered in Las Vegas, NV Energy Inc. is a holding company whose principal subsidiaries, Nevada Power Company and Sierra Pacific Power Company, are doing business as NV Energy. Serving a 54,500-square-mile service territory that stretches north to south from Elko to Laughlin, NV Energy provides a wide range of energy services and products to approximately 2.4 million citizens of Nevada as well as approximately 40 million tourists annually.

Major injury accident sends 3 to hospital, closes Hwy. 50

By Kathryn Reed

A major accident Saturday morning in front of Lira's Market in Meyers sent two people to Renown Medical Center in Reno with major injuries and one to Barton Memorial Hospital in South Lake Tahoe.

The two people in a mini van refused treatment.



What's left of the Audi.

Photos/Lake Valley Fire Department

This was one of four accidents the local California Highway Patrol office worked that day.

The cause of the 8:10am accident that closed Highway 50 in both directions for 45 minutes is still under investigation. It was open to one-way traffic for 20 minutes until all the debris could be cleared from the road.

Two helicopters landed in the parking lot of the grocery store – one from CalSTAR, the other from CareFlight. Flown out were a 42-year-old male from South Lake Tahoe driving an Audi and a 43-year-old woman from Sacramento driving a 4-Runner.

Taken by ambulance to Barton was a 55-year-old male from Sacramento riding in the Toyota.

Lake Valley fire Capt. Chad Stephen said his department needed to use rescue tools to extricate one of the drivers.

"It was a bad mess and cars were all over the place," Stephen said.

The mini van ended up off the highway.

CHP Officer Chuck Brothers said the Audi was west on Highway 50 near the Chevron station when it drifted into the eastbound lane, striking the driver’s side of the 4-Runner.

“The first collision caused the Audi to spin and the rear end of the Audi to collide with the front of the mini van,” Brothers said. “Based on the damage to the Audi, there is definitely some speed involved.”

He said no obvious signs of alcohol were apparent.

The speed limit there is 40mph.

An accident at 1:25pm on Saturday at Pickett’s Junction, the intersection of highways 88 and 89, sent three people to Barton. Three South Lake Tahoe residents in a Jeep Cherokee had minor injuries. The driver, a 50-year-old male, had injuries from the airbag; the 53-year-old female passenger had abrasions from the seat belt; and an 18-year-old male had minor injuries.

The driver of the Dodge, who is from the Central Valley, was not injured.

An accident at Highway 89 and South Upper Truckee Road involving a Porsche and Harley-Davidson resulted in no injuries.

A cyclist was flown to Renown with major head injuries when he tumbled onto the road near Jameson Beach. Brothers said the 42-year-old male from South Lake Tahoe was intoxicated. CalSTAR took him to the hospital at 4:25pm.

Angora burn area may be

replanted this week

The U.S. Forest Service Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit may begin planting native seedlings in the Angora Fire area this week if soil conditions are appropriate.

Reforesting the area with native species such as Jeffrey pine, sugar pine, incense cedar and red fir will speed up progress toward healthier forest conditions, according the Forest Service.

Without this helping hand, little to no natural regeneration of conifers would occur in the high severity burn areas. In areas where natural regeneration occurs, seedlings would mainly consist of white fir, which is susceptible to drought, disease and fire, officials say.

The Forest Service will allow natural regeneration in some areas and permit other areas to return to chaparral. No replanting will occur in riparian zones or aspen stands.

Because anywhere from 30-60 percent of seedlings may not survive, initial planting is at much higher densities that what is eventually desired.

Due to the scale and short time-frame for the planting, the Forest Service will use contract crews. Planting should take about three weeks, with crews working from 6am-6pm, including weekends.

The seedlings will be 1-year-old and about 6-inches high when they arrive. The Placerville Nursery supplies the seedlings, which are collected from a seed source appropriate to the elevation and site characteristics of the fire area. To increase the seedlings’ chance of survival, crews will remove competing vegetation for up to 3 feet surrounding the seedling during planting and as needed during future years.

Northstar’s Ritz on financial fritz

By Mark Anderson, Sacramento Business Journal

Bank of America has filed a notice of default against the Ritz-Carlton Highlands Lake Tahoe, a luxury resort that opened just four months ago.

The notice of default, filed at the end of March, claims the Highlands Hotel Co. LLC is $18.6 million in default on the hotel and a neighboring parcel. The default involves two loans totaling

Ritz-Carlton
at Northstar

$157 million.

Read the whole story