

Drought's lessons for food security

By Ken Sofer, Slate

Despite the arrival of increased rain and snow from El Niño this winter, California enters the fifth straight year of its worst drought in 1,200 years. The drought has been especially acute in the state's Central Valley, which ranges from extreme to exceptional drought.

With its fertile soil, moderate climate, and unparalleled irrigation system, the Central Valley is one of the most productive agricultural regions on the planet, producing nearly all of America's almonds, olives, walnuts, and pistachios; the vast majority of its grapes, strawberries, avocados, carrots, tomatoes, and lettuce; and \$13.1 billion worth of milk and cattle. As a result of the drought, California's 39 million residents are competing for fewer available water resources. Water prices have spiked, increasing tenfold in some areas.

The drought and the subsequent increased cost of water have led to declines in agricultural production across the state.

Read the whole story

Dead Sierra trees a

combustible quaqmire

By Scott Smith, AP

California's drought and a bark beetle epidemic have caused the largest die-off of Sierra Nevada forests in modern history, raising fears that trees could come crashing down on people or fuel deadly wildfires that could wipe out mountain communities.

Officials who are cutting down and stacking the most dangerous trees in piles across six counties, however, say they are stumped by how to get rid of them all.

One solution is to fire up a fleet of 10 large, mechanized incinerators the state recently purchased. Promoters say they burn so hot that they spew little if any smoke, making them environmentally friendly.

Environmentalists contend the burners undercut an emergency order by Gov. Jerry Brown – considered a global leader in the fight against climate change – who called for sending the trees to biomass plants and converting them into energy.

Chief Ken Pimlott, who manages the state's response to the die-off as director of CalFire, defended the air burners as one of many tools.

He acknowledged the burners will contribute to air pollution, as with any work in the forest, but much less than a large wildfire, which the air burners may prevent by removing dead trees.

"We could have a catastrophic wildfire in any of these communities," he said, adding that sending trees to electricity-generating plants remains a priority. "We have to be aggressive in terms of protecting life and property."

Called air-curtain burners, the 20-foot long, steel containers

blast a sheet of air over the open top, disposing of up to eight trees an hour. The state bought them for roughly \$1 million, part of a \$5 million investment in equipment to meet the epidemic.

A lack of visible smoke, however, doesn't mean the air burners are clean, said Chad Hanson, a forest ecologist at Earth Island Institute's John Muir Project. He called them a waste of taxpayer money and a misguided approach to managing California's forests.

"You're still pumping a lot of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere," Hanson said.

Living trees absorb and store carbon dioxide, a major source of greenhouse gases, which is released again when the wood is burned. Hanson said he favors leaving the trees that need to be cut down on the forest floor to naturally decompose as wildlife habitat.

He urged Brown to withdraw the emergency declaration, fearing that it would increase logging of dead trees that forests need to replenish. Hanson added that dead trees don't fuel more fierce wildfires as commonly believed.

Last year alone 29 million trees died at the height of California's drought now in its fifth year, the U.S. Forest Service reports. Drought makes trees vulnerable to the insects' attack, officials say.

A beetle epidemic in forests of the Rocky Mountain states was blamed in 2013 for contributing to Colorado's second largest wildfire, forcing entire communities to be evacuated, said Jeff Mai, aerial survey manager for the U.S. Forest Service based in Colorado.

Officials removed some trees throughout the region that threatened people, selling them as lumber products like fence posts. Most were left to decompose naturally. Mai said that in

California, bark beetles have killed five times more area of forests than in Colorado.

It's unclear how many trees in the Sierra will be cut down. Officials say the first job is removing those that threaten motorists and mountain communities.

Declaring the emergency on Oct. 30, Brown formed a task force, including representatives of the energy industry and environmentalists, that is charged with carrying out the order, which emphasizes sending the trees to biomass plants that turn agriculture and tree waste into electricity.

That has moved slowly because California's few remaining biomass plants are closing as utility companies turn to cheaper sources of solar and wind.

Another solution to turn the dead trees to lumber has hit obstacles because they quickly deteriorate, and beetles carry a fungus that stains the wood blue, diminishing its value.

Urgency for residents at the heart of the tree epidemic remains high as California enters another potentially explosive wildfire season.

"One big fire in the wrong place will become very big, very fast," said Randy Hanvelt, a Tuolumne County supervisor. "I'm afraid people are going to die."

CalFire plans to start running the air burners around the clock this fall.

An environmental benefit of the air burners is that they eliminate the soot, a major contributor to climate change, said Norbert Fuhrmann, vice president of Air Burners, Inc., the device's Florida-based manufacturer.

Jim McDougald, a CalFire division chief in Fresno County overseeing the burners, said he prefers turning the trees into energy, lumber or opening undiscovered markets to give them

value.

But the air burners are one means for the state to get rid of trees in the massive die-off that's changing the Sierra's landscape for years to come, he said.

"This is bad," said McDougald, standing at a lookout point south of Yosemite, where a few patches of dead trees two years now dominate the vista. "It'll never come back – not in our lifetime."

Nev. schools no longer worst in country

By Trevon Milliard, Reno Gazette-Journal

Nevada's public school system no longer ranks last in the nation, a position it held for the past four years.

The Silver State is now second to last, edging out New Mexico for 49th place, according to the 2016 Kids Count report published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The foundation is one of America's predominant organizations in child welfare issues. Its annual Kids Count report evaluates states in four areas: economic well-being, education, health and family/community. All this information is combined to determine state rankings for children's overall well-being, with Nevada landing 47th out of 50 states.

Read the whole story

Heavenly makes epic changes for summer

By Kathryn Reed

Heavenly Mountain Resort is becoming a year-round economic driver.

With the opening of Epic Discovery this month, the South Shore resort is redefining itself – at least when it comes to summer activities.

For years the Broomfield-Colo.-based firm wanted to diversify, but U.S. Forest Service regulations prevented that from happening. The feds own much of the land where the ski resorts operate. Congress, though, in 2011 changed the rules, thus allowing resort operators to alter their business model.

Vail Resorts launched the multi-million dollar on-mountain expansion at Heavenly and Vail this year, with Breckenridge to be added in 2017. Resort officials did not release the exact cost of the improvements.

(At this time there are no plans to transform Northstar or Kirkwood. Northstar is still working on its master plan.)

“These kinds of options are highly likely to result in visitors planning extra days in our community because there’s more for them to do now. This of course translates to an improved economy, which means more job stability for people who work in tourism whether they work in lodging, restaurants, retail or other businesses who are impacted by the success of tourism,” B Gorman, CEO of Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

It takes manpower to operate the various recreation activities. Heavenly will be putting 200 people to work this summer. Those are full-time jobs. Many of those employees work for the resort in the winter, so now they have year-round employment.

Epic Discovery features 12 activities including an alpine coaster, ziplines, ropes courses, canopy tours, rock climbing, tubing, 4 x 4 expedition tours, wildlife trail exploration and interactive learning stations.

“It’s got so many levels of impact on the destination, benefitting everyone from resident to visitor to our overall competitive differentiation,” Carol Chaplin, executive director of Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The benefits Chaplin sees include:

- New year-round jobs.
- Mountain access for the summer visitor.
- Access for the visitor who may not otherwise have an opportunity or inclination to venture out.
- Experiential activities that provide education and foster stewardship.
- Recreational opportunities that appeal to a broad age range.
- The contribution by the Nature Conservancy.
- The potential to increase the average length of stay of visitors, providing additional economic impact.

Snow forced construction to be slow and delayed this spring. Plus, with it all being new, it took longer to get things in place for this inaugural season. Footings for some of the

apparatus needed to be installed. That's a one-time issue. For the pieces that will be taken down in winter it should be easier to erect them next summer now that people have installed them at least once.

"I think it is important to recognize that these new activities on the mountain provide approachable access to the outdoors for visitors who might otherwise be intimidated to venture out into the wilderness," Gorman said.

While Heavenly has been adding more to its summer offerings for the last few years, this is a more complete experience. The main thing missing from what's on the drawing board is the bike park. That is still a couple years off.

"We want to optimize what we have now," Pete Sonntag, COO of Heavenly, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "There is so much new that we don't want to take on too much."

More hiking trails will also be added in the future.

Search for missing paddleboarder called off

By Jessica Hice, Sacramento Bee

The search for a college football player who presumably drowned June 10 during a Lake Tahoe paddleboard excursion has been suspended indefinitely, the Placer County Sheriff's Office announced Wednesday.

Marc Ma, 20, ventured with several other football players from

UNR on a paddleboarding trip about 2 miles offshore near the Obexer Marina. High winds causing 3- to 5-foot swells knocked the boarders into the water, the sheriff's office said.

It said Wednesday on Twitter that it suspended the search because of Lake Tahoe's deep water and a belief that a "steeply sloping lake bottom covered with boulders has concealed his final location."

Read the whole story

Nev. seeks 'answers, not excuses' for painkiller epidemic

By Jason Hidalgo, Reno Gazette-Journal

Calling it one of the deadliest epidemics affecting Nevada and the United States, Gov. Brian Sandoval said everything is on the table for addressing the state's prescription painkiller problem.

"At least one person in Nevada dies every day from an opioid overdose," Sandoval said. "We can and we must do better."

An ongoing issue in Nevada for years, prescription opioid abuse gained additional attention in April after law enforcement raided a Reno car dealership. The raid was part of an investigation into an alleged oxycodone drug ring following the death of former Nevada football player Michael Yenick. The investigation also led to the arrest of Dr. Robert Rand of Rand Family Care in Reno.

Read the whole story

DCSID building sewage overflow system



Construction has the bike trail temporarily out of commission.
Photo/Bill Kingman

The sizable excavation project along Elks Point Road heading toward Nevada Beach is a sewage overflow gallery for Douglas County Sewer Improvement District.

It will result in additional and redundant wet well storage for the district's main sewer lift station at Elks Point Road and Dorla Court, according to Douglas County officials. It is being put in so that if the pump fails, sewage would not reach Lake Tahoe.

The gallery is underground and will not be visible when the

project is complete.

During construction the bike path is being rerouted.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

GOP puts more boots on the ground in Nev.

By Ben Botkin, Las Vegas Review-Journal

Republicans are taking the lessons they learned from the past three presidential elections and putting them to use in Nevada and elsewhere in 2016.

It's led to an added emphasis on a boots-on-the-ground approach in the Silver State and much less reliance on phone banks to reach and recruit potential voters.

National and state Republican leaders reached this point by starting early with planning and taking a look at what worked – and didn't work – in the past three presidential elections. Republicans won just one of those – in 2004 when President George W. Bush was re-elected. President Barack Obama won the next two in 2008 and 2012.

Read the whole story

Officers to ratchet up boat patrols at Tahoe

This weekend, many law enforcement agencies will be out in force on waterways looking for drunken boat operators.

This heightened vigilance, known as Operation Dry Water, is part of a national effort to change the cultural acceptance of drinking and boating, and raise awareness that boaters can have safe and fun recreational boating experiences without the use of alcohol and/or drugs. California will also emphasize the dangers that drunken passengers face.

Since the launch of Operation Dry Water in 2009, the number of recreational boating fatalities with alcohol named as a contributing factor has decreased in the United States. As of 2015, the national alcohol-related boating fatality rate was 21 percent. In California, alcohol use remains a leading contributing factor in boating deaths. The state's recreational boating accident statistics show that over the past five years (2011-15), 33 percent of boating fatalities were alcohol-related (when tests were conducted).

Plague treatment forces Tahoe campground closure

State officials are closing Fallen Leaf Lake Campground from June 27-July 1 in order to apply a pesticide to "minimize potential future plague risk," according the U.S. Forest

Service.

Campers must check out by noon Monday. The gate will likely reopen the morning of July 1.

California Department of Public Health officials want all rodent burrows to be dusted with a pesticide to reduce the number of fleas that can carry plague. The pesticide to be used, DeltaDust, is a pyrethroid that has minimal effects to people or pets with direct contact. Pyrethroids are a man-made version of pyrethrins, which are natural insecticides made from chrysanthemum flowers.

Test results confirmed on June 20 that four out of 15 rodents tested positive for exposure to plague. Health officials are not aware of any human contact with infected rodents or fleas at the campground.

Plague is naturally present in many parts of California, including higher elevation areas of El Dorado County and is spread by squirrels, chipmunks and other wild rodents and their fleas. People may get plague if bitten by an infected flea or through close contact with an infected rodent or pet. Plague can be prevented by avoiding contact with wild rodents, and by keeping pets away from rodent burrows. Risk of acquiring plague is low when precautions are taken.

Symptoms of plague usually show up within two weeks of exposure to an infected animal or flea, and include fever, nausea, weakness and swollen lymph nodes. Plague can be effectively treated with antibiotics if detected early.