

Feds: Drought kills 66 million trees in Sierra

By Scott Smith, AP

The number of trees in California's Sierra Nevada forests killed by drought, a bark beetle epidemic and warmer temperatures has dramatically increased since last year, raising fears they will fuel catastrophic wildfires and endanger people's lives, officials said Wednesday.

Since 2010, an estimated 66 million trees have died in a six-county region of the central and southern Sierra hardest hit by the epidemic, the U.S. Forest Service said.

Officials flying over the region captured images of dead patches that have turned a rust-colored red. The mortality from Tuolumne to Kern counties has increased by 65 percent since the last count announced in October, which found 40 million dead trees.

California is in the fifth year of a historic drought, which officials say has deprived trees of water, making them more vulnerable to attack from beetles.

Gov. Jerry Brown in October declared an emergency, forming a task force charged with finding ways to remove the trees that threaten motorists and mountain communities.

These efforts have hit obstacles, slowing the tree removal as California enters a potentially explosive wildfire season.

Brown pushed for burning the trees at biomass plants to generate electricity, sending them to lumber mills or burning them in large incinerators, removing potential fuel for wildfires.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, who oversees the

Forest Service, said disaster awaits if more money isn't invested in managing forests in California and across the country. He urged Congress to act.

"Tree die-offs of this magnitude are unprecedented and increase the risk of catastrophic wildfires that puts property and lives at risk," he said in a statement. "We must fund wildfire suppression like other natural disasters in the country."

The Forest Service has committed \$32 million to California's epidemic, and the state budgeted \$11 million for CalFire to buy tree removal equipment and to grant local communities money for their own work.

So far, the Forest Service says it has cut down 77,000 trees that pose the greatest risk to people, along roads and near communities and campgrounds. Crews from CalFire and Pacific Gas and Electric Co. also are at work using chain saws and wood chippers to remove dangerous trees.

Kathryn Phillips, director of the Sierra Club California, said the die-off from drought should signal to policy makers the urgency of curbing pollution that contributes to climate change.

"This is a warning to all of us," she said. "We need to cut our air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions more. We're on the right path, but we need to accelerate our effort."

Sierra snowmelt runoff coming

up short

By Kurtis Alexander, San Francisco Chronicle

The El Niño-fueled storms that coated the Sierra with nearly normal snow this winter brought blasts of hope to drought-weary California.

But after the flurries stopped and the seasons changed, the melt-off from the high country has been swift and disappointingly scant, according to new water supply estimates from the state.

The Department of Water Resources now projects that the mountains will produce about three quarters of normal runoff during the months of heaviest snowmelt, shorting the rivers and reservoirs that typically provide a third of California's water – and cementing a fifth year of historic drought for the Golden State.

Read the whole story

SLT creating welcome center at airport

By Kathryn Reed

What does the lobby of Lake Tahoe Airport, aka South Lake Tahoe City Hall, say?

The answer, according to Councilmembers Wendy David, Austin

Sass and Hal Cole, is that it's shabby and there is so much potential. They voted Tuesday to spend hundreds of thousands dollars to renovate the space and transform it into a welcoming venue for locals and tourists. After all, the main offices for the city of South Lake Tahoe are expected to be located there for the unforeseeable future.

Councilmembers Tom Davis and JoAnn Conner are all for spending the money to upgrade the infrastructure and make it comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. However, neither wants to do more than the minimum.

The council on a 3-2 vote agreed to pay more than \$600,000 to renovate the facility, with the goal of having it completed by the end of September. About half of the money is for needed upgrades like plumbing, electrical, heating and air conditioning. The other half is "extras" to create a visitors center of sorts, as well as upgrade council chambers and the lower lobby area.

It is not possible to divide the work into "necessary" and "extra" because that would most likely require going out to bid again. Plus, some of the improvements are intertwined.

Much of the money to do so comes from Barton Health having bought coverage from the city. The banked asset comes from the airport so the money has to be spent at that facility.



Lake Tahoe Airport's lobby doubles as the entrance to South Lake Tahoe's city offices. Photo/LTN file

Signs will be placed on Highway 50 directing people to the visitors center.

The city has already talked to Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority about helping with what should be included in the display. It won't be a staffed facility. It will, though, be interactive. For those wanting to talk to someone, there is the receptionist for the city and phone lines will go directly to the LTVA.

With the restaurant at the airport being overhauled, it may also become more of a destination for locals. The new owners have already said the stack of brochures for tourist-type business will no longer be in there.

One of the major sticking points for Davis and Conner is the gas fireplace that will be installed. Plus, they don't think this is the best use of city dollars. Conner also advocated for moving City Hall someplace closer to the heart of town so it would be easier to get to. However, she didn't have any ideas for where the millions of dollars to do this would come from.

Davis has never supported the renovation idea.

Cole believes the upgrades will be beneficial no matter what the use of the facility is in the future, and that they are long overdue. Plus, he believes the design will be a showcase of alpine architecture with wood and rock that the electeds say they want others to incorporate when doing any future construction.

At the June 21 meeting the contract was awarded to DML Construction. The firm plans to use six local subcontractors.

In other action:

- The council unanimously agreed to make the next franchise agreement with Southwest Gas be 10 years. And the

electeds want all future franchise agreements to be 10 years. Some have been for 30 or 50 years.

· The council at a future meeting will be discussing the rental car surcharge imposed by Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. This was implemented when the airport had commercial air service.

Study: Calif. years from drought recovery

By Scott Smith, AP

It could take California four years to recover from the most severe drought on record, even if the next several winters bring above-normal snowfall to the Sierra Nevada, researchers said Tuesday.

One winter of El Nino storms that delivered a near-normal snowfall wasn't enough to make up for the deficit from four consecutive dry years in the Sierra, a critical water supply statewide, the study says.

The lack of snow forces water suppliers and farmers to draw heavily on reservoirs, groundwater and other sources, said Steve Margulis, a civil and environmental engineering professor at the UCLA who led the study.

"The deficit we have is so large it is very, very unlikely to recover in one year," he said.

Snow typically falls each winter in the Sierra and melts during the warm months, rushing down streams and rivers into reservoirs. It provides critical water supplies to millions of

residents and vast farmland in the nation's leading agricultural state.

Consecutive dry years are common in California, but this drought – now entering a fifth year – is the most severe in the last 1,200 years, according to studies cited in the research.

California recovered in as little as one year from past droughts, such as one in 1977, but this one is exceptional, said Margulis, publishing the findings in the *Geophysical Research Letters*, a journal of the American Geophysical Union.

In the study, researchers combined three decades of NASA satellite imagery taken of the Sierra snowpack with state snowpack measurements collected since 1951.

Today, California's snowpack is at 8 percent of normal for this time of year, according to the state Department of Water Resources figures.

The study is designed to help leaders chart water policy. Last year, state regulators imposed historic cutbacks on farms and cities. Restrictions on residents were recently relaxed, allowing local water districts to set their own conservation efforts.

"It is critical for regions like California, that rely on their regional snowpack for water supply, to understand the dynamics of the system," Margulis said.

Truckee assault sends 1 to

hospital, 1 to jail

A Chico man remains hospitalized three days after being in a fight at a bar in Truckee.

Jesse Hill, 39, was found unconscious on the sidewalk in front of the Pastime Club on June 18 at 11:05pm.

Truckee police officers said Hill and Bryan Sperlin, 24, of Truckee began arguing earlier in the evening at the Tourist Club bar. Hill left the Tourist Club and was later standing in front of the Pastime Club. As Sperlin was entering the Pastime Club he and Hill began a second argument.

“This argument led to a physical altercation that resulted in Hill being severely injured and left unconscious,” officers said in a statement.

Sperlin faces felony assault charges causing serious bodily injury and probation violation.

Anyone with information about this case is asked to contact the Truckee Police Department at 530.550.2323.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Immigration court ruling could affect Nevada

By Alexander S. Corey, Las Vegas Review-Journal

The U.S. Supreme Court could soon rule in a case involving the legality of President Barack Obama’s 2014 immigration plan to

protect millions of undocumented immigrants from deportation.

The decision could affect thousands of people in Nevada, where 8 percent of the population is undocumented –the highest percentage in the country – according to Pew Research Center.

Francisca Sanchez, 41, knows firsthand how the program could benefit her family. At a park near her home, with her daughter in tow, Sanchez described the day a few years ago when her husband left for work, but didn't come home for nearly a month after U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detained him.

Read the whole story

Enviro docs study Placer County redevelopment

Public comments on the draft environmental impact report/environmental impact statement for the Placer County Tahoe Basin Area Plan and Tahoe City Lodge will be taken until Aug. 15.

The county's goal is to spur sustainable redevelopment in Kings Beach and Tahoe City. The environmental document analyzes impacts of the Tahoe Area Plan and the Tahoe City Lodge project.

"The environmental analysis for the Tahoe Area Plan is at a programmatic level – reflecting its influence on a variety of projects over a long timeframe – and includes analysis of a design concept for redevelopment of the Placer County-owned Kings Beach Center. The environmental analysis for the Tahoe City Lodge is at a project level, meaning it separately

addresses the impacts of a fully discrete project,” county officials said in a press release.

The proposed Tahoe City Lodge project is a private project that would redevelop an existing commercial complex into a 118-unit lodge and would also redevelop the Tahoe City Golf Course clubhouse facility.

There will be public hearings about the draft EIR-EIS on:

- July 13, 9:30am: Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Advisory Planning Commission, 128 Market St., Stateline.
- July 27, 9:30am: Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Regional Plan Implementation Committee, North Tahoe Event Center, 8318 North Lake Blvd., Kings Beach.
- July 27, 9:30am: Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board, North Tahoe Event Center, 8318 North Lake Blvd., Kings Beach.
- July 28, 10am: Placer County Planning Commission, North Tahoe Event Center, 8318 North Lake Blvd., Kings Beach.
- Aug. 11, 6pm: Placer County North Tahoe Regional Advisory Council, North Lake Tahoe Event Center, 8318 North Lake Blvd., Kings Beach.

The draft EIR/EIS is available **online**.

Tests show target shooting can start fires

By Benjamin Spillman, Reno Gazette-Journal

If you're wondering about the relationship between target

shooting and wildfire risk you don't have to rely on speculation or anecdotal reports.

The U.S. Forest Service has a thorough scientific study of the question that seemingly provides an answer.

And the answer is, yes, firing bullets into dry vegetation can result in ignition.

Read the whole story

2 clashing options on death penalty

By Bob Egelko, San Francisco Chronicle

Death-penalty supporters submitted signatures on a ballot measure last month aimed at speeding up executions in California, setting the stage for voters to decide in November whether to retain and overhaul the state's death penalty or abolish it.

Prosecutors, law enforcement groups and victims'-rights advocates turned in 593,000 signatures for the initiative, which would attempt to fix a system plagued by delays and high costs by tightening legal deadlines and requiring more lawyers to take capital cases. Last month, opponents of the death penalty submitted 601,000 signatures for an initiative to repeal capital punishment and replace it with life in prison without parole. Each measure needs 365,880 valid signatures to qualify for the ballot.

A recent Field poll indicated that Californians were closely divided, with 48 percent in favor of speeding up executions

and 47 percent preferring to eliminate them. If both measures win majority votes, a provision in the pro-death penalty initiative says only the one receiving more votes would become law. That has been the rule for conflicting ballot measures in the past, but a leader of the campaign to abolish the death penalty argues that a majority vote for the repeal measure would override any vote for the rival proposal.

Read the whole story

Calif. sets aside \$270M to upgrade county jails

By Don Thompson, AP

Counties will get another \$270 million for jail construction under the budget approved by California lawmakers this week, even though opponents say the money could be better spent on rehabilitation programs.

The state has provided \$2.2 billion to build jails since 2007, including \$1 billion since California began keeping lower-level offenders in county lockups instead of state prisons in 2011.

Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal for an additional quarter-billion dollars this year was rejected by Assembly and Senate budget committees and the Legislative Analyst's Office, which said the Democratic governor failed to show the need for more construction money.

"There's gonna be an end to the jail construction binge and we ought to look at more cost-effective ways of reducing

recidivism and reducing crime,” said Sen. Jim Beall, D-San Jose, who voted to remove the funding.

But it’s back in the final budget at the insistence of the governor and county governments that say they need the construction money to update antiquated jails.

The need has grown, they said, since the state began sending more serious, long-term and mentally ill inmates to local jails instead of state prisons.

The competitive grants will be available to 20 of the state’s 58 counties that received only partial funding in previous years or never had state help in replacing or renovating jails.

“The need is clear, that there are counties that have applied for prior rounds and have been unsuccessful or have not applied in the past and still have needs, and this gives them another chance to make the appropriate upgrades that will provide needed space for programming, education, treatment and rehabilitation,” said California State Sheriffs’ Association spokesman Cory Salzillo.

The budget also includes \$20 million earmarked for Napa County’s jail, which was damaged in a 2014 earthquake.

“It’s just really shocking that after both subcommittees rejected the jail construction funds that it would come back in this way,” said Lizzie Buchen, co-coordinator of Californians United for a Responsible Budget, which opposes prison and jail spending.

The budget does include \$67.5 million for grants to counties that prefer not to build new jails and want to offer more mental health and addiction treatment facilities.

“Not every county wants to build jails,” said Sen. Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, chairman of the Senate budget committee.

“There are some that want to address similar populations in a different way.”

A year ago, the state Senate similarly objected to \$500 million for jail construction money only to see it revived in the final budget agreement.

The legislative analyst earlier this year said the additional money might not be needed in part because of a 2014 ballot initiative that lowered penalties for certain drug and property crimes. The state’s jail population dropped by 10,000 inmates after voters approved Proposition 47.

Salzillo said money is needed if sheriffs are to provide the sorts of rehabilitation programs that lawmakers and voters envisioned when they approved legal changes in recent years.

The budget also includes another \$28 million on top of nearly \$40 million that Brown previously set aside for mental health and substance abuse treatment, crime victims and school truancy programs under Proposition 47.

The legislative analyst has projected that about \$130 million would be saved in the first year by reducing the prison population through lesser penalties.

“This budget reflects increasing support for smart approaches to safety and justice,” John Bauters, policy director for Proposition 47 proponent Californians for Safety and Justice, said in a statement.

The state budget was approved by the Assembly and Senate. Brown is expected to sign it into law.