

Ex-firefighter going to prison for arson

A former CalFire firefighter from Placerville with a penchant to set fires is going to prison for five years.

Benjamin Cunha, 33, was sentenced Feb. 23 after admitting to setting at least 30 wildland fires in El Dorado and Amador counties during the summers of 2006 and 2007. Two of these fires burned onto federal land.

He must also pay \$246,862 in restitution to CalFire.

When he was arrested in December 2008 this was not the first time he was charged with arson. In March 2008 his sentence for having set three fires was suspended with several conditions. They included registering as an arsonist for the rest of his life and wearing a tracking device during the fire season.

"As he admitted in his plea agreement, this defendant set a multitude of fires with a callous disregard for the danger to life and property that he was inflicting," U.S. Attorney Wagner said in a statement. "(Tuesday's) sentence is a just result that takes a serial arsonist off the streets."

On Oct. 6, he pleaded guilty to one count of arson for the July 6, 2007, Mine Fire, a vegetation fire that burned approximately 80 acres.

Cunha was a seasonal employee for CalFir during the 2001, 2002 and 2003 fire seasons. At the time of the arson activity, he was a volunteer firefighter for Diamond Springs.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Dry future weighs heavy on Calif. ag

By Sena Christian, High Country News

On a hot summer afternoon, California farmer Chris Hurd barrels down a country road through the Central Valley city of Firebaugh, his dog Frank riding in the truck bed. He lurches to a stop in front of Oro Loma Elementary School, which was built in the 1950s to accommodate an influx of farmers' and farmworkers' children. "All three of my sons went here," Hurd says, as we walk through overgrown weeds toward the shuttered building, closed in 2010. "I was on the school board, the grass was green, kids were running around. Now it's a pile of rubble."

Agricultural land stretches out in every direction. Most of the town's 8,300 residents are involved in growing or packing produce. The city is on the west side of the San Joaquin River, an area hit particularly hard by a historic drought, now in its fifth year. Wells have run dry and farm-related jobs are running out. Many other places in the eight counties comprising the San Joaquin Valley have suffered similar fates. These areas were disadvantaged to begin with, rural and isolated, lacking infrastructure, public transportation and safe housing. Persistent drought has compounded the struggles of some of the poorest communities in the nation.

As of late January, 64 percent of the state was experiencing extreme drought – down from 78 percent that time last year. But even a stellar El Niño year won't undo all the damage.

Economically, California remains the largest agricultural producer in the United States. But El Niño's precipitation not

withstanding, the prolonged drought is putting some farmers under heavy duress, and no one is sure how far California's Eden will sink.

Read the whole story

Only one of California's pot legalization initiatives has the green that counts

By Phil Willon, Los Angeles Times

Devout cannabis advocates and social justice reformers believe this may finally be the year that California voters legalize all marijuana, and that optimism has led to a mashup of proposed statewide ballot measures – more than 20 filed so far.

They vary from a one-sentence constitutional amendment that simply declares California adults are free to “grow, own [and] purchase” marijuana to a 62-page treatise on how to best regulate and tax legal pot.

But just one has attracted the deep-pocketed donors and leading advocacy groups to emerge as the clear favorite to make the November ballot – the so-called Adult Use of Marijuana Act.

Read the whole story

Tahoe heat wave to continue into next week

More bare skin than usual has been seen around the Lake Tahoe Basin lately as temps feel more like spring than winter.

The National Weather Service in Reno is predicting Friday to be the warmest day of the week. It could hit 60 in South Lake Tahoe, 59 in Truckee and 56 in Tahoe City.

Most of the high records for Feb. 26 are well into the 60s. The exception is South Lake Tahoe. The record for that date is 57, so if the forecast holds, it will be a new high.

“We will still be well above average through early next week,” NWS meteorologist Tony Fuentes told *Lake Tahoe News*. “We don’t have any big storms coming in.”

He said a weak system may “brush by” the area Friday night and another one Sunday night into Monday.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Training mission in Sierra becomes real-life rescue



This hole, slightly smaller than a manhole cover, is what what Samantha White fell into on Feb. 21. Photo/Marin County Sheriff's Department

By Jodi Hernandez, NBC Bay Area

A Marin County Sheriff's Office search-and-rescue crew is credited with saving the life of a 10-year-old girl.

Officials said the girl on Feb. 21 fell into a 10-foot hole after a snow bridge she was on gave way in the Sierra. The search-and-rescue team just happened to be hiking down the same trail after spending the day training when it came across the incident at Castle Peak in the Tahoe National Forest.

"The snow just swallowed her up," said Hilda White, mother of the rescued girl. "It was perfect timing that they happened to be coming down from the peak and happened upon my husband within 15 minutes of her falling in."

Read the whole story

Lake Tahoe Brewing owner arrested

By Mike Higdon, Reno Gazette-Journal

The owner of Lake Tahoe Brewing Co. was arrested on charges of felony theft Monday morning after Carson City sheriff's deputies found people taking property out of the brewery in downtown Carson City and putting it into a moving van.

Felony theft means stealing property valued at more than \$3,500 and is punishable by one to 10 years in prison or \$10,000 fine. The amount of the alleged theft is \$45,000. Owner Michael Candelario was being held at Carson City jail for \$25,000 bail.

On Jan. 27, Lake Tahoe Brewing closed because its brewing equipment stopped working in October 2015.

Read the whole story

What to expect in Nevada's GOP caucus

By Seth A. Richardson, Reno Gazette-Journal

With the Democratic caucus in the rearview mirror, Nevada now turns its attention to Tuesday's Republican caucus.

By most accounts, real estate mogul Donald Trump is leading the pack followed by Texas Sen. Ted Cruz and Florida Sen. Marco Rubio in a race for second, mirroring the last two races in New Hampshire and South Carolina. Retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson is campaigning in the state trying to eke out a decent showing while Ohio Gov. John Kasich forwent Nevada in favor of the 11 states that will vote on March 1.

Recent polling shows Trump at 45 percent, leading Rubio with 19 percent and Cruz with 17 percent.

Read the whole story

2015 saw largest increase in traffic deaths in 50 years

By Associated Press

WASHINGTON – The number of traffic deaths in the United States rose 8 percent from 2014 to 2015, the largest year-to-year percentage increase in a half-century, according to estimates by the National Safety Council.

About 38,300 people were killed on U.S. roads, and 4.4 million people were seriously injured, the council said. That would make 2015 the deadliest driving year since 2008.

The council said a stronger economy and lower unemployment rates were probably among the key factors, along with lower gas prices. With driving more affordable, more people are on the road. Average gas prices were 28 percent lower last year than in 2014 and are projected to continue dropping this year.

The Transportation Department estimates a 3.5 percent increase

in the number of miles driven by motorists in the United States in 2015.

The council's estimates correspond with one from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which also found an 8 percent increase in fatalities for the first half of 2015.

Among the biggest increases last year were in Oregon (27 percent), Georgia (22 percent), Florida (18 percent) and South Carolina (16 percent). Only 13 states showed improvement, including New Mexico (a 20 percent drop), Kansas (down 7 percent) and New Jersey (lower by 2 percent).

The estimated cost of motor-vehicle deaths, injuries and property damage in 2015 was \$412.1 billion, according to the council, a nonprofit organization created by Congress to promote safety. That total includes wage and productivity losses, medical expenses, administrative expenses, employer costs and property damage.

Calif. bill would give access to police misconduct records

By Vivian Ho, San Francisco Chronicle

Records detailing police misconduct and serious use of force, long kept confidential, could become public in California if legislation announced Friday is passed into law.

State Sen. Mark Leno, seeking to tighten accountability amid a national conversation over police shootings and a push for law enforcement reform in San Francisco, introduced a bill that would roll back a 1978 law and subsequent Supreme Court

rulings that prompted cities to close police disciplinary cases to the media and the public.

It's the second time Leno has pushed to restore such access, but stopping the bill will be a top priority for police unions, who argue that accountability can be achieved without violating officers' privacy.

Read the whole story

Tahoe Queen faces fine for 2015 oil spill



Oil sheen on Lake Tahoe near the Tahoe Queen in March 2015.
Photo/Provided

By Lake Tahoe News

Aramark faces a nearly \$5,000 fine for having spilled hydraulic fluid from the Tahoe Queen into Lake Tahoe last year.

Aramark, the parent company of the paddle-wheeler based out of the Ski Run Marina in South Lake Tahoe, has until March 10 to respond. If the company disputes the fine, there will be a hearing in May.

Lahontan Regional Water Control Board could have fined the company \$10,000. Instead the penalty is \$4,983.

The spill occurred March 5, 2015. Four gallons reached the lake. Nine in total leaked from the vessel.

A resident who had taken her dog to the beach first notified officials of the problem. The animal came out of the water with an oily substance on its fur.

"When the complainant returned to the marina to identify a potential source of the oily substance, she observed an oily and greasy-to-the-touch sheen on the water where the dog had been," according to Lahontan documents.

According to information provided to the water board from Aramark, "Maintenance activities on the Tahoe Queen vessel's paddlewheel had been occurring prior to the discharge event. A contractor for the discharger, Advanced Marine, was conducting the maintenance. The contractor disconnected the hydraulic lines, but the lines were not adequately capped per industry standard (i.e., steel caps). The contractor capped the lines using only plastic and duct tape to prevent dust and water from entering the lines. The contractor did not create a pressurized seal to prevent oil from spilling from the lines because the contractor believed the engine was static and would not be started."