Nevada casinos tally more, lose less in 2015

By Associated Press

Nevada casinos collected almost 3 percent more revenue in fiscal 2015 than a year earlier, but logged an overall loss in income for a seventh straight year, according to state Gaming Control Board data released Thursday.

The $24.6 billion that casinos statewide collected in gambling and non-gambling revenues in the 12 months ending June 30 represented a net loss of almost $662 million.

But that was less than the $744 million loss reported in fiscal 2014, when casinos took in $24 billion.

Board analyst Michael Lawton called the overall trend upward, with revenues almost back to the $25 billion last seen in 2007 and 2008.

"We're only 2.6 percent below those peak levels," he said. "It's an increase in revenue, but it still resulted in a net loss."

The comprehensive annual report, dubbed the Gaming Abstract, includes nearly 250 pages of data about number of employees, room occupancy rates and gambling revenue per square foot of casino space.

It said Nevada has 271 casinos statewide grossing more than $1 million in gambling revenues, including 155 in Clark County — home to the Las Vegas Strip.

Washoe County's 37 casinos reported total revenues of almost $1.5 billion, and a combined net loss of $7.4 million. Six Lake Tahoe-area casinos reported a net loss of $150 million. Elko County's 19 casinos reported just under $45.5 million in combined net income.

The report highlighted another continuing trend – revenues tilting away from the tables and slot machines and toward restaurants, retail, entertainment and rooms.

Casino gambling-only revenues were $10.6 million stateside in fiscal 2015, down 0.2 percent from 2014. The more than $5.8 billion from the Las Vegas Strip was more than half the total, and a 2.5 percent decrease year-to-year.

That marked a historic low in gambling as a percentage of overall revenue, at just under 35 percent, said David Schwartz, director of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Center for Gaming Research.

"It's a sign of the changing market," Schwartz said. "Food is growing and gaming as a percentage is shrinking. What I'm hearing from people is they spend more on food and entertainment than gambling. This is what the visitors seem to want."

Lawton noted that the last time gambling revenue from the Las Vegas Strip represented more than 50 percent of the overall total was 1998.

Today, room rentals, food, beverage and other revenues make up 57 percent, according to the data.

Placer County taking steps to regulate pot

Placer County Board of Supervisors this week voted to enact a placeholder ordinance asserting the county's authority medical marijuana sales and cultivation.

This comes on the heels of December’s decision to move forward with regulating medical marijuana in unincorporated areas of the county. At that time staff was directed to develop comprehensive regulations for their consideration.

The California Medical Marijuana Regulation and Safety Act set a March 1 deadline for jurisdictions to assert local authority over medical marijuana regulation. If they don’t, the state assumes control.

The Jan. 5 vote affirmed that the county’s permitting process will mirror the state’s and established the Agricultural Commissioner’s Office as the lead county agency for medical marijuana regulation.

The goals for staff to consider as it moves forward with developing the framework include:

- Promoting public health and safety
- Reducing the size of the illicit market for cultivation and retail sale
- Preventing non-medical access and use by youth
- Reducing environmental harm to water, habitat and wildlife
- Providing clear criteria for responsible businesses and patients who wish to operate within the law
- Developing a fair system of regulation and taxation that supports public purposes
- Providing flexibility and authority for modification or adoption of additional measures into the regulatory process to ensure effective implementation

Future public meetings will seek community input on the regulations.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Brown’s budget helps schools, poor; saves for rainy day

By John Myers , Melanie Mason and Christine Mai-Duc, Los Angeles Times

By now, it could easily be called Gov. Jerry Brown’s budget doctrine — an insistence on only modest expansions in state services but liberal payments for one-time expenses and accumulated government debt.

In his new $170.7-billion budget proposal to legislators, Brown is again staying consistent with his creed.

The plan provides a sizable boost to public education and only modest help to low-income families, but its most important component may be how much money would be stashed away for future budget deficits.

Brown proposes making an additional $2-billion payment into the state’s rainy-day fund, growing the size of the reserve account by next summer to almost two-thirds of its legally mandated goal. That would be significantly ahead of schedule, but a decision the governor insisted is essential.

Read the whole story

Critters a menace to U.S. power grid

By Katherine Shaver, Washington Post

U.S. electric utilities are battling a bushy-tailed, nut-loving menace that has wreaked havoc on far more Christmas tree lights, TVs and cellphone chargers than any terrorist plotting against the power grid.

That's right. Beware the squirrel.

Even as utilities have spent millions on "wildlife protection," squirrels routinely outsmart plastic animal guards on energized equipment, gnaw through rubbery insulation and squirm into power substations, zapping electricity to thousands of homes and businesses while meeting an untimely death.

Storms still tend to cause the longest and most widespread outages, experts say. But the American Public Power Association, which represents municipal electric utilities and uses a "squirrel index" to track outages nationwide, says the critters remain the most frequent cause, even if those outages are more limited than storms.

Read the whole story

2015 was second-warmest year

on record in U.S.

By Associated Press

U .S. weather officials say December's wild El Niño pushed 2015 to near-record levels for heat, moisture and downright extreme conditions.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced Thursday that last year was the second warmest and third wettest in 121 years of record keeping for the lower 48 states.

The 54.4-degree average last year was second only to 2012.

Scientists blame a combination of man-made climate change and El Niño, the natural warming of the central Pacific that changes weather worldwide.

The U.S. set the record for warmest and wettest December, beating the old monthly warm temperature mark by nearly a degree.

NOAA said its extreme-weather index ranked 2015 as the most extreme year on record.

Global figures come out later, but 2015 will likely rank as the hottest.

Nevada falls to last in education ranking

By Trevon Milliard, Reno Gazette-Journal

After years of floundering near the bottom in a widely watched report card for state education systems, Nevada has sunk to dead last.

For the first time, the Silver State fell behind all other states and Washington, D.C., in the annual Quality Counts report, which assigns overall scores to states based on student performance, school financing and other qualities of K-12 public schools.

"It's honestly disheartening," said Nevada interim Superintendent Steve Canavero on Wednesday before the results were publicly released.

Read the whole story

EDC seeks to be part of State of Jefferson

Updated Jan. 8, 6:40pm:

By Alexei Koseff, Sacramento Bee

Now tallying 20 counties among their ranks, supporters of the movement to carve an independent "State of Jefferson" out of Northern California plan to introduce a bill this session seeking sovereignty.

Organizers on Wednesday turned in declarations for 15 counties, including Sutter, Nevada and El Dorado, asking the state to grant them permission to separate. Six others petitions — which were either passed by the county boards of supervisors or reflect signature-gathering drives — have already been filed.

Jefferson proponents contend that their rural areas lack adequate representation in state government, which has led to over-regulation and environmental policies that decimated their regional economies, particularly the logging and mining industries that historically supported them. Their seal bears an XX, signifying that they have been double-crossed by state government.

Read the whole story

Burning Man appeals tax that could raise ticket prices

By Riley McDermid, San Francisco Business Times

A new Nevada state tax that could cost the promoters of popular festival Burning Man an extra $3 million a year and cause ticket prices to rise is being appealed by promoters.

Promoters from the Burning Man Projects have said the increase could cause tickets prices to spike as much as $35 to about $425 per person.

Last year, Nevada passed SB 266, which says says non-profits that offer for sale 7,500 tickets or more, and where the patrons participate in that entertainment, and “the number of tickets to the activity offered for sale or other distribution is 15,000 or more,” are no longer excluded from the live entertainment tax.

Read the whole story

Battle heating up over prescribing painkillers

By Matthew Perrone, AP

WASHINGTON — A bold federal effort to curb prescribing of painkillers may be faltering amid stiff resistance from drugmakers, industry-funded groups and, now, even other public health officials.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was on track to finalize new prescribing guidelines for opioid painkillers this month. The guidelines — though not binding — would be the strongest government effort yet to reverse the rise in deadly overdoses tied to drugs like OxyContin, Vicodin and Percocet.

But this highly unusual move — the CDC rarely advises physicians on medications, a job formally assigned to the Food and Drug Administration — thrust the agency into the middle of a longstanding fight over the use of opioids, a powerful but highly addictive class of pain medications that rang up over $9 billion in sales last year, according to IMS Health.

Critics complained the CDC guidelines went too far and had mostly been written behind closed doors. One group threatened to sue. Then earlier this month, officials from the FDA and other health agencies at a meeting of pain experts bashed the guidelines as "shortsighted," relying on "low-quality evidence." They said they planned to file a formal complaint.

The CDC abandoned its January target date, instead opening the guidelines to public comment for 30 days and additional changes.

Anti-addiction activists worry the delay could scuttle the guidelines entirely.

“This is a big win for the opioid lobby,” said Andrew Kolodny, co-founder of Physicians for Responsible Opioid Prescribing, a group working to reduce painkiller prescribing.

CDC Director Tom Frieden said politics did not play a role and the guidelines remain a priority.

“We want to make sure we don’t go so fast that there are questions about our process, but we certainly don’t want to see any further delay,” Frieden told the Associated Press.

Frieden said the FDA and other agencies support his effort, despite the negative comments from some officials. The Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees both the CDC and the FDA, said the guidelines are critical to “tackling the opioid epidemic.”

Frieden acknowledged the limited evidence comparing various treatments. “But there is no way we can wait for better evidence while so many people are dying.”

Under the proposed guidelines, doctors would prescribe these drugs only as a last choice for chronic pain, after non-opioid pain relievers, physical therapy and other options. The CDC also wants doctors to prescribe the smallest supply of the drugs possible, usually three days or less for acute pain. And doctors would only continue prescribing the drugs if patients show significant improvement.

The CDC’s logic: Reshaping how primary care doctors use painkillers would result in fewer prescriptions and, therefore, fewer deaths. By its estimation, deaths tied to these drugs have surged more than four-fold since 1999.

But industry-funded groups like the U.S. Pain Foundation and the American Academy of Pain Management warn that the CDC guidelines could block patient access to medications if adopted by state health systems, insurers and hospitals. Such organizations often look to the federal government for health care policies.

The CDC decision to delay its guidelines followed months of lobbying by physician and patient groups aligned with the pharmaceutical industry, who have almost always had a seat at the table in federal discussions on painkillers. As a result, they have had far more influence over federal policy than addiction activists, according to experts.

“They’re very well-funded and they have a lot of pharma money behind them,” said Dr. Lewis Nelson of New York University, an FDA adviser who is also advising the CDC on its guidelines. “And then you have the anti-addiction groups on the other side, which is clearly much less funded and organized.”

The Washington Legal Foundation — a conservative group which frequently represents pharmaceutical interests in court — says CDC is in “blatant violation of federal law” for not disclosing its advisers. The foundation wants the CDC to scrap its current guidelines and start over.

EDC defending itself regarding mitigation fees

El Dorado County Board of Supervisors on Jan. 5 unanimously agreed to spend up to $150,000 from the county’s self-insurance fund to defend how the county collects mitigation fees.

Thomas and Helen Austin of El Dorado Hills in December filed a lawsuit against the county regarding building permit fees.

The couple in court documents believe the county is violating the Mitigation Fee Act and therefore wants the county to refund nearly $30 million to the people who have paid the fees either directly to the county, to El Dorado Hills Fire Department, or to El Dorado Hills Community Services District.

In one of Robyn Drivon's last acts she recommended the expenditure. Her last day as county counsel is Jan. 10. The supervisors agreed to hire Abbott & Kindermann of Sacramento to handle the case.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report