

Insurance rates soar in high fire-risk areas

By Samantha Masunaga, Los Angeles Times

Soaring insurance rates may accomplish what the Telegraph Fire failed to do: drive the Stoffan family from their home of 10 years.

The Stoffans' Northern California house survived the 2008 blaze, which destroyed 30 homes and 100 other structures as it charred 53 square miles west of Yosemite National Park.

But the family's annual insurance costs doubled this year to \$5,100 even though it planted a 50-foot lawn buffer around the house and installed fire-resistant landscaping.

The Stoffans are among the California homeowners living near wild lands who have seen their rates increase sharply because insurance companies are increasingly wary of high fire-risk areas. Factors fueling insurer's fears include the drought and some huge recent blazes, such as the 2013 Rim fire that burned more than 250,000 acres in and around Yosemite.

Affected residents across the state complain of fire insurance rates leaping 30 percent or more.

Read the whole story

USFS-CTC want to swap Lake Tahoe parcels

By Kathryn Reed

A significant land swap between the U.S. Forest Service and California Tahoe Conservancy will take an act of Congress to come to fruition. The two agencies are banking on the passage of the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act (LTRA) to make it a reality.

The overriding goal of the exchange is to create better management opportunities by having contiguous parcels be owned by the same entity. It also has the Forest Service getting out of the urban lot business.



The proposal includes:

- CTC to USFS – 92 parcels; 2,007 acres
- USFS to CTC – 2,029 parcels; 1,918 acres
- California State Parks to USFS – 1 parcel; 184 acres
- USFS to California State Parks – 1 parcel; 274 acres

There are two bills circulating in Congress that would

reauthorize the LTRA. Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., introduced a bill that the CTC and USFS provided technical assistance to. The land exchange language regarding retiring coverage and other development rights has been vetted by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency legal counsel. It would follow the Burton-Santini Act by not allowing the USFS transferred properties to be built on. The bill also says the CTC would not sell the parcels nor would any of the commodities, like coverage, be able to be sold. All assets associated with the parcel would be retired.

“Our proposal is to retire all development rights,” Patrick Wright, CTC executive director, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “The House bill is a little looser.”

The bill Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Granite Bay, is pushing does not have all the same constraints as the Senate bill, nor is it the preferred bill by the agencies.

“Both bills contain provisions that would prevent us from selling parcels,” Chris Mertens, associated environmental planner with CTC, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Senate Bill 1724, section 9:

- *Land exchanges shall “not result in any significant changes in the uses of the land”;*
- *Prohibits the recognition or transfer of development rights associated with conveyed parcels under TRPA’s “transferable development rights” system. (In other words, the development rights of conveyed parcels would be permanently retired.);*
- *If any conveyed parcel is used in a manner inconsistent with its original use, the parcel will revert to the USFS.*

House Bill 3382, section 9:

· *Conveyance “shall not result in any substantial reduction in public access or reduction in availability of existing and traditional public recreation uses.”*

On Sept. 9 the two agencies hosted an open house for people to give input about the proposed land swap. A similar gathering will occur tonight in Tahoe City.

The information that is gathered this week will be analyzed and passed up through the USFS ranks and to congressional offices.

Jeff Marsolais, supervisor for the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, said the comments will help direct the agencies to which lots might be traded, and when and how to do so. A phased approach has been recommended, but officials don't want the process to be dragged out. After all, talk of this land swap has been going on for years.

The bills don't require all the parcels to be transferred, but it allows for them to be.

The Forest Service will also have to go through an environmental review process, though to what magnitude has not been determined. If things go forward, any deed restrictions on individual properties will have to be identified as well as any other constraints.

For the CTC to transfer its properties all that is needed is board approval.

Essentially what will happen is the transfer will be called a donation of land from one agency to the other to expedite the process.

If the LTRA again fails to be reauthorized, it's possible to have a separate bill authored to deal just with the property transfer or to tie it to another lands bill. Because state's rights are involved, it is believed the president is not able

to issue an executive order to make this happen without congressional approval.

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Notes:

· The Tahoe City open house is Sept. 10 from 5-7pm at the Tahoe City Public Utility District's Lakeview Room, 221 Fairview Drive.

Drivers often responsible for speed limits

By Tony Bizjak, Sacramento Bee

Who determines the speed limit on streets you drive daily? In a lot of cases, it's ... you.

The answer is complex. Like it or not, drivers often get to vote with their gas pedal foot.

State law requires cities to measure the speeds that drivers travel on certain – but notably not all – streets, and use the results to adjust speed limits. The streets where local officials are required to do “speed surveys” are known in the traffic engineer lingo as collectors and arterials.

Read the whole story

Calif. climate fight comes down to late negotiations

By Judy Lin, AP

SACRAMENTO — Gov. Jerry Brown has made climate change the centerpiece of his final tenure by laying out the most aggressive benchmark in North America, which would reduce California's carbon footprint and boost the state's renewable energy use to 50 percent in 15 years.

Securing legislation requiring that standard in the world's eighth-largest economy would be a timely win for Brown before international leaders meet in Paris in November for the United Nations climate change conference. Brown is likely to attend the conference, but he has not said so officially.

But first, the Democratic governor has to break through a logjam in his own party in the final week of the legislative session.

Many Assembly Democrats — including moderates and those representing less wealthy districts — are concerned that the ambitious proposal to cut petroleum use by half, boost renewable electricity use to 50 percent and double energy efficiency in existing buildings will hurt California's economy and working-class residents.

An oil industry-funded group, the California Driver's Alliance, is running what climate law proponents call "fear-mongering" ads suggesting the bill will raise gas prices and even result in rationing, harkening back to gas lines during the oil crisis of the 1970s.

Lobbying has intensified on both fronts. Billionaire environmental activist Tom Steyer and Oscar-winning actress Halle Berry are making personal appeals urging undecided

lawmakers to vote for the bill. They are joined by President Obama, California U.S. Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer and a long list of fellow Democrats.

So far, the Brown administration and legislative leaders have shared little publicly as backroom negotiations come down to Friday's deadline to consider bills.

"I think the historic weight of this measure is starting to be felt," said Senate President Pro Tem Kevin de Leon, D-Los Angeles, during a press conference Tuesday with local bishops, who cited Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment as a call to action.

"I think at the end of the day that many members on the Assembly side will clearly look at the short- and long-term implications of health and to the economy of California and will do the right thing," said de Leon, who is carrying Brown's proposal.

Californians share Brown's environmental concerns and a majority supports his call for tougher standards. A July poll by the Public Policy Institute of California found 79 percent of residents agree global warming is either a very serious or somewhat serious threat to quality of life.

One of the main sticking points for lawmakers reluctant to tighten climate change rules concerns the California Air Resources Board, an unelected body with broad power to set vehicle emissions and fuel standards to decide how the state will reduce oil use.

Some moderate Democrats want the Legislature to approve board regulations, but de Leon has said he is unwilling to strip the agency's power. Sen. Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills, who is carrying a companion bill to extend California's current emission-reduction targets to 2050, said she would add a requirement for the board to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of policies for lawmakers to review.

Another major point of contention is the mandate to cut gasoline use by 50 percent. The oil industry views it as a direct attack on its business, and it is fighting back through ads and lobbying in the Capitol. Assemblyman Henry Perea, D-Fresno, whose district is dominated by oil and agriculture, has been the most visible moderate. He has suggested scaling back the petroleum mandate.

Supporters say it's possible to reduce emissions by increasing fuel efficiency standards, adding thousands of electric vehicles and adding solar and wind to the electricity grid. They say the push to use advanced technology will create a new economy of clean energy, good-paying jobs.

Still, lawmakers worry about the practical effects on residents.

Assemblyman Jim Cooper, D-Elk Grove, said when actress Berry spent a recent morning lobbying lawmakers, he told her he was undecided because solar panels and electric vehicles have largely benefited wealthier communities.

"I like the bill, I think it's good. My kids have asthma. But my frustration is the amendments are coming in the last nine days of session and we haven't even seen them yet," Cooper said. "I just want to make sure the middle-class and poor people aren't left out."

Complicating climate change talks in Sacramento are a pair of special legislative sessions to figure out how to pay for California's transportation infrastructure and state-funded health care. Lawmakers also have hundreds of bills to tackle in the final hours of the legislative session.

Tahoe earthquake 'domino effect' studied

By Jeff DeLong, Reno Gazette-Journal

With the frightening potential of a massive earthquake and tsunami striking the Pacific Northwest under increasing discussion, scientists are also focusing attention on possible connections between that area and dangerous faults at Lake Tahoe.



Graham Kent, a South Tahoe High grad, is in charge of UNR's seismic lab. Photo/LTN file

There, like along the coastlines of Washington, Oregon and Northern California, a big quake could someday trigger a deadly tsunami, with some preliminary research suggesting seismic connections between the areas.

"If everything in this region is synchronized, all of a sudden there could be a domino effect" after a big quake in the northwest, said Graham Kent, director of the Nevada Seismological Laboratory at UNR.

"We know these things have a long arm," Kent said.

Read the whole story

NV Energy bills about to be less expensive

By Kyle Roerink, Las Vegas Sun

NV Energy will rebate \$110.8 million to customers on their power bills in October, according to the company's Public Utility Commission filings.

Residential customers could see \$2 to \$3 knocked off their bills, while large customers like hotels and casinos could receive credits of up to \$113,000.

The rebate is the result of NV Energy paying less than projected for fuel.

Read the whole story

NDOT working to improve safety on Hwy. 28

The Nevada Department of Transportation this week started to construct pedestrian and safety enhancements on Highway 28 in Incline Village.

The project will relocate a crosswalk on Highway 28 west of Village Boulevard closer to existing bus stop and pedestrian

crossing points. The crosswalk east of Village Boulevard will remain in place to serve an existing bus stop. Both crosswalks will be enhanced with pedestrian crossing warning signs equipped with rapid flashing beacons activated when pedestrians push the crossing button.

Street lighting and sidewalk ramps will be added, along with enhanced pedestrian crossing signs in advance of the crosswalks.

Left turn lanes from Country Club Drive to Highway 28 will also be installed with new traffic detection systems to help drivers most efficiently and safely get through the intersection.

Construction is projected to complete by the end of fall. Drivers should expect minor, intermittent travel delays during construction.

Runnels removes vehicles on deadline day

The cars are gone from Runnels Automotive per a judge's order that was issued last month.

Just before 10am on Sept. 8 South Lake Tahoe code enforcement and police, along with a couple tow trucks converged in the TJ Maxx parking lot across the street. By noon all of the old vehicles – most of which didn't run – were removed from the property at the Y.



John Runnels

On Aug. 6 after a four-hour hearing, El Dorado County Superior Court Judge Daniel Proud determined the vehicles were abandoned, which violates city ordinances.

Runnels was issued a dealers' license in 1979 by the DMV, the same year the city's Planning Commission approved a special use permit allowing him to store unregistered vehicles at the Emerald Bay Road business. Two of the conditions of the city permit were that Runnels had to maintain valid certification from the state to sell and repair vehicles. They both expired. That gave the city the power to revoke the special use permit.

"Although code enforcement was there to ensure those vehicles were removed, also a towing company offered to assist John and they removed the last of few vehicles John had left to remove," City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*. "The outcome resulted in the vehicles removed, John being able to retain all those vehicles, although they are stored in other locations, and compliance with the judge's order."

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Changing landscape of Tahoe's

environmental movement

By Kara Fox, Moonshine Ink

After decades of development lawsuits throughout the Tahoe basin and Truckee, change has quietly been happening over the last few years as conservation groups and developers come together on projects. While environmental leaders say litigation can be necessary to protect the environment, they believe working with the developers is a better strategy to advance their cause.

Since 2012, when new executive directors took the helm of both the League to Save Lake Tahoe and Mountain Area Preservation – two local environmental groups historically known for litigation – the environmental movement shifted. The new leaders have ushered in a more collaborative form of environmentalism. In this new model, litigation is used as a last resort and meetings with developers are commonplace to come to a consensus on development projects. In addition to advocacy, the groups are also focusing on community education, outreach, and awareness, which they say was needed to change the community's perception of the organizations.

"The environmental movement has changed," said MAP Executive Director Alexis Ollar. "It seemed like we were the 'no, no, no' group. You can't say no to everything. Change is inevitable."

Jesse Patterson, deputy director for the League, agreed.

"It is [about] trying to be pragmatic about environmental problems at Lake Tahoe," Patterson said. "You have to grow with the times; we want to remain effective."

Read the whole story

Drought, wildfires among Western issues facing Congress

By Bill Theobald, Statesman Journal

WASHINGTON — From drought to wildfires, Congress faces numerous issues of special importance to Westerners when it returns today.

The cost of fighting the fires has already exceeded what had been budgeted for fire suppression this year, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said. That means the Forest Service and the Interior Department will have to shift funds intended for other uses to pay for fighting fires. This “fire borrowing” siphons money targeted for clearing undergrowth and other steps to prevent fires or reduce their severity.

For several years, legislation has been proposed to change the method for paying to fight wildfires to avoid fire borrowing. There are two competing proposals in the Senate this year.

In its fourth year, drought’s footprint continues to expand in the West, according to the National Drought Mitigation Center. The most serious level — exceptional drought — covers most of central California and western Nevada. That area is ringed by the next most serious level — extreme drought — which extends throughout much of Oregon and Washington and into western Montana and northern Idaho.

Read the whole story