

Tesla buys 2,000 more acres in Northern Nevada

By Sandra Chereb, Las Vegas Review-Journal

Tesla Motors Inc. is expanding its presence in the Northern Nevada desert. Records from the Storey County assessor's office shows the California-based electric car maker recently purchased nearly 2,000 more acres in the Tahoe-Reno Industrial Center east of Reno, where it is building a massive battery factory in partnership with Japanese electronics maker Panasonic Corp.

The acquisition triples the size of Tesla's property holdings in the Silver State, bringing total acreage to around 3,000. Tesla bought 1,000 acres in the industrial park last year. Tesla, led by billionaire chief executive Elon Musk, is building a \$5 billion, 5 million square-foot manufacturing plant where it intends to produce lithium ion batteries. Musk has said the batteries are key to the California car maker's goal of mass marketing its fast and sporty electric cars and make them more affordable to the general public.

Read the whole story

IDs released of those involved in fatal crash

It will be up to the El Dorado County District Attorney's Office if charges are filed in the death of Skye Melzer.

The 21-year-old South Lake Tahoe woman was the passenger on a

motorcycle that was hit by a truck on Highway 50 on July 5.

Melzer died at Renown Medical Center in Reno from her injuries.

Michael Cearley, 54, of South Lake Tahoe was turning left from the highway onto Modesto Avenue when he struck the motorcycle what was driven by Harrison Russel, 23, of South Lake Tahoe, according to officers. Russel sustained minor injuries and was treated at Barton Memorial Hospital; Cearley was not injured.

Alcohol and drugs were not a factor, nor was weather, according to officers.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Officials: Forest health, fire, water all related



Forest thinning projects help create a healthy watershed. Photo/LTN file

By Kathryn Reed

What happens in the Sierra, does not stay in the Sierra. That is the message those tasked with managing land, water and fire suppression in the mountains are trying to convey to people downstream and to politicians in Sacramento and Washington, D.C.

The goal is to change how forests are managed. In part this has to do with the U.S. Forest Service now spending more money on fire suppression than on fire prevention. Prevention – aside from education – comes in the form of thinning forests so they are healthy and less prone to a catastrophic fire. Healthy forests also allow for more water to enter the aquifers because there are fewer trees absorbing the moisture. With them spaced out more, it means more snow on the ground.

All of this is important to the Lake Tahoe Basin because the Forest Service owns about 80 percent of the land. And most of the 25 million acres in the Sierra Nevada are controlled by the USFS, with National Parks, Bureau of Land Management and private owners making up much of the rest of the ownership puzzle.



The 2007 Angora Fire helped spur collaboration in the basin. Photo/Lake Valley Fire

Richard Solbrig, South Tahoe PUD general manager, told *Lake*

Tahoe News that a comprehensive approach to the ecology of Lake Tahoe is critical.

Fires are burning hotter because of the massive amount of fuel in the forests. The mortality rate from the drought will compound that scenario. It used to be the burn rate on average was 20 percent. The Rim Fire by Yosemite was 40 percent and the King Fire by Pollock Pines was 50 percent.

“There’s a lot of landscape with too many trees. It’s not healthy. It’s not the way it was historically,” Jim Branham, executive officer of Sierra Nevada Alliance, said.

He was one of several speakers July 15 at a forum hosted by South Tahoe Public Utility District about the threat of high intensity wildfire at Lake Tahoe. The nearly 40 people in attendance represented the USFS, CalFire, most fire districts in the basin, Association of California Water Agencies, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, League to Save Lake Tahoe, Tahoe Fund, Tahoe Resource Conservation District, staff from the offices of Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dean Heller and Reps. Mark Amodei and Tom McClintock, and others.



Jerry Brown on April 1 stands in a field by Sierra-at-Tahoe

that should be
covered in snow.
Photo/Susan Wood

“It took the drought for the governor to stand in a meadow and see the significance of the Sierra,” Branham pointed out. This was in reference to when Jerry Brown attended the last snow survey at Echo Summit this spring.

With the majority of California’s potable water coming from the Sierra, the value and importance of this swath of land cannot be understated. The lack of snowfall is like turning the spigot off for the rest of the state.

The Association of California Water Agencies, which is comprised of 430 public water agencies in the state, this spring came out with a framework to improve the resiliency and management of headwaters like the Sierra.

One of the recommendations was: “Stakeholders should invest and participate in landscape-level research that explores water and forestry relationships, including ecological forest thinning which can have multiple benefits for water supply reliability, water quality and ecosystems.”

The Sierra Nevada Conservancy this spring launched the Sierra Nevada Watershed Environmental Improvement Program. The key outcomes are to increase funding for the watersheds and identify policies that impede the process of creating a healthy watershed.

It was acknowledged that ultimately laws might need to be changed at the state or federal levels to get a better functioning system.

Money – or the lack of it – was a reoccurring theme among the speakers. While there is some disagreement on what should be done, let alone the priorities, the bigger issue is there isn’t enough money for projects no matter what decisions are

made.

The short-term goals of Wednesday's gathering were to get people talking and to build on collaboration that already exists.

Dennis Cocking, who is working as a consultant to South Tahoe PUD, spoke about how the water agencies in the basin have been collaborating for a number of years, especially after the 2007 Angora Fire. This has allowed the group to be able to get funding for projects. The agencies are also working so water can flow from one district to the others. It happened with Gondola Fire in 2002 and Angora.

The other immediate point was for political operatives to hear the message. This is critical with the latest version of the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act having been introduced this month. That \$415 million piece of legislation includes \$150 million for fire prevention.

Liberty to start work on electrical line upgrade

Liberty Utilities in early August will begin construction to upgrade electrical lines in the North Lake Tahoe-Truckee area.

This month crews will begin prepping the site and bringing in materials.

The 650 electrical line is one of the oldest lines in Liberty

Utilities' service territory. The company said upgrading the line, which will eventually operate as part of a 120 kV loop, will allow greater load transfer and switching capability, and will improve Liberty's ability to serve the North Lake Tahoe area.

The first phase involves the power line segment that is located between Martis Valley and the Northstar substation that generally follows Highway 267. Construction will primarily consist of replacing old wooden poles with self-weathering steel poles. The work should be done by mid-October.

The next segment of the 650 rebuild project will consist of work from the Northstar substation tap to Kings Beach, and will be completed in 2016.

California adopts strict lawn-reduction rules

By Phillip Reese, Dale Kasler and Ryan Sabalow, Sacramento Bee

The era of lush, green lawns adorning new California homes moved a dramatic step closer to ending Wednesday.

Drought-tolerant plants must dominate lawns around new homes and businesses across California under new regulations unanimously approved by the California Water Commission.

The new rules effectively limit the amount of turf grass around newly constructed homes to 25 percent of landscaped area. Under prior rules, turf grass could take up about one-third of landscaped area.

The restrictions will apply to all homes with more than 500 square feet of landscaped area – essentially, all new, single-family, detached homes in the state. Old rules only applied to new homes with more than 2,500 square feet of landscaped area. California homes, on average, feature about 2,500 square feet of landscaping, state officials said.

Read the whole story

BlueGo fleet to be exclusively diesel powered

By Kathryn Reed

Soon Tahoe Transportation District's fleet of BlueGo buses on the South Shore will all be diesel.

This is because the board this month voted to get rid of the compressed natural gas buses and the fueling station it operates at Lake Tahoe Airport.

"CNG has not been that great of a performer in mountain environments like ours, especially when you have hills to climb. When you combine that with where diesel technology has come, it is very clean and definitely more affordable and provides the power we need," TTD Executive Director Carl Hasty told *Lake Tahoe News*.

It costs TTD about \$72,000 to operate the station. They are responsible for nearly 98 percent of the usage. Other users have been notified it will be closing this summer.

TTD will also save money by not needing staff to maintain the facility or have parts for that fleet.

Placer County's TART bus service uses CNG. Four of TTD's CNG-fueled buses will go there.

"The TTD fleet includes 15 CNG powered buses. Buses 3281 and 3282 are currently not in service and were scheduled for disposal this year and buses 3283 and 3284 have exceeded their federal useful life and have CNG storage tanks that will expire in the next two years," the staff report says. "The cost to replace CNG storage tanks is typically around \$20,000 per bus. Another five CNG vehicles have exceeded their federal useful life and are also eligible for disposal. Of the remaining six CNG vehicles, buses 3274 and 3275 are specialized CNG-powered trolleys that will be retained for use on the West Shore. These buses will fuel at Placer County's Cabin Creek CNG station. Placer County is interested in acquiring the other four CNG buses. These four buses have remaining federal interest and must be transferred to another grantee to avoid repaying FTA a prorated share of the federal interest."

TTD added five buses to its fleet in May and will add another four in September.

The now defunct South Tahoe Area Transit Authority, which used to run BlueGo, began acquiring CNG buses about 13 years ago at a time when it was deemed this would be the more environmentally friendly route. That is not the case now. Hasty said TTD will keep looking at alternatives, but added electric vehicles won't be purchased in the near future.

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Note:

- TTD staff will be giving a presentation to the South Lake Tahoe City Council on July 21 at 9am at Lake Tahoe Airport.

Planned controversy Placerville

Parenthood reaches

By Sammy Caiola, Sacramento Bee

StemExpress, a Placerville biotech firm specializing in stem cell procurement for scientific research, is under fire after being mentioned in a viral YouTube video created by abortion opponents.

The video, posted Tuesday, shows footage of Dr. Deborah Nucatola, senior director of medical services at the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, discussing over lunch the harvesting of fetal organs for research. She's talking with two actors from the anti-abortion group Center for Medical Progress, who were posing as representatives from a biotech firm.

The eight-minute undercover clip, which has garnered over 1 million views and inspired the popular anti-abortion Twitter hashtag "#PPSellsBabyParts," is edited in a way to suggest Planned Parenthood and its affiliates profit from fetal tissue and organs procured during abortions, which is against federal law.

Read the whole story

Feds urge bus safety rules similar to planes

By Fenit Nirappil, AP

SACRAMENTO — Federal safety officials on Tuesday urged commercial buses to have more clearly labeled emergency exits and safety briefings similar to those on planes after their investigation of a deadly collision in California in which a tractor-trailer slammed into a bus full of students.

Dozens of students struggled to escape the burning, smoke-filled bus after the FedEx truck veered across an interstate median about 100 miles north of Sacramento and struck it head-on April 10, 2014. Both drivers, five students and their three adult chaperones died.

National Transportation Safety Board investigators determined the truck driver, 32-year-old Timothy Evans, losing control was the probable cause of the crash, but they couldn't conclude why. The agency said the driver's actions weren't consistent with him falling asleep, but may suggest he had a seizure or fainted.

The federal investigation also found that students struggled to escape from the bus because of poorly labeled exits and no safety instructions as required by the bus company's policy.

The four-member NTSB at its meeting in Washington, D.C., voted to urge regulators to improve emergency exits and add fire-resistant materials to buses so it is easier for passengers to survive crashes.

NTSB Chairman Christopher Hart said the case exposed "double standards in regulations protecting motor coach passengers."

"When plane crashes are survivable, many more people survive,"

said Hart.

Board officials said buses should have the path to emergency exits light up after crashes and a black box-style data recorder, while drivers should offer safety instructions as flight attendants do.

The bus driver on the first leg of the California trip told investigators he did not show a six-minute safety video at the start of the trip, according to NTSB records.

More than half of the 29 students interviewed did not know which windows were designated as emergency exits, and some shattered other panels to escape. Those who climbed out had to drop 7 feet.

The NTSB is urging new buses to have second doors that double as easier escape options, as is standard in Europe.

The bus was equipped with seat belts ahead of a federal mandate taking effect next year, but not all students were wearing them.

The investigation also raised questions about fire safety.

The bus exploded into flames after the crash, and at least two passengers died of asphyxiation. Board officials said decades-old standards for vehicle materials withstanding fires should be updated because they treat a four-passenger sedan the same as a double-decker bus and don't take into account fires ignited by crashes.

Victor Parra, president and CEO of the United Motorcoach Association, said some of the NTSB's safety recommendations may make sense, but should be backed up by science showing they'll make a difference.

"Buses are the safest way to travel on the nation's highways, bar none," said Parra. "We have plenty of exits now; it's a matter of making passengers aware of what they are and how

they use them.”

The NTSB can recommend safety rules, but it’s up to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration to enact them. NTSB officials have criticized agencies for ignoring its calls, some decadeslong, to shore up bus safety.

The bus in California’s crash was carrying 44 students from Southern California for a free tour of Humboldt State University. Many were hoping to be the first in their families to attend college.

FedEx and the bus company, Silverado Stages Inc., are facing lawsuits from survivors of the crash and families of the victims.

FedEx did not comment on the NTSB’s findings, and Silverado Stages CEO John Busskohl did not immediately respond to an email and calls.

State still collecting evidence in dead bear case

By Kathryn Reed

The investigation involving the killing of a bear by a South Shore resident should be wrapped up by the end of the month. Ultimately it will be up to the El Dorado County District Attorney’s Office if charges are filed.

A necropsy – aka animal autopsy – was done on the 2½-year-old bear that was shot July 9. The cause of death was presumably because it was shot in the backside with buckshot from a

shotgun, according to Patrick Foy, captain with the California Department of Fish & Wildlife.



A bear was shot to death last week on the outskirts of South Lake Tahoe. Photo/Toogee Sielsch

The bear was found the next day sprawled on its back at the base of a tree off Pioneer Trail near Minniconjou Drive.

A game warden with the state did not see any blood, but instead used other tracking techniques that led him to a house in the area. Foy told *Lake Tahoe News* a man in his 70s admitted to shooting the bear and told authorities he did so in self-defense.

It is legal to discharge a firearm in the basin and shoot an animal if one believes his or her life is in jeopardy or property needs protecting.

Foy said the shooter, whose name has not been released, had inquired about a bear depredation permit earlier this year, but chose not to get one.

This bear was not tagged – meaning it had not been captured before as a nuisance bear.

State ruling: Supervisor Novasel not banned from all aspects of Meyers Area Plan

By Kathryn Reed

El Dorado County Supervisor Sue Novasel is allowed to engage her constituents in discussions about any topic. The same is not true when it comes to staff or other board members. And some items she won't be allowed to vote on.

At the urging of county counsel she asked the Fair Political Practices Commission to rule on potential conflicts of interest. The FPPC made its decision in late June. Most electeds at the local level recuse themselves from time to time on issues. This is because they are not allowed to vote on a matter that could financially benefit them.



Sue Novasel

With Novasel, her two big issues – that are known today – are the inability to vote on the Meyers Area Plan and the proposed courthouse in Placerville. The former is because she has property in the plan area, the latter is because her husband through his company has given a loan to the property owner.

What the FPPC said is Novasel may discuss these issues with the public and media, but not with staff or other supervisors. The limit on staff-board interaction is so she is not influencing them in their work and decision making. She is allowed to receive all material that is available to the public.

“County counsel still advises me to be careful when discussing things with the public to avoid even the perception of influencing,” Novasel told *Lake Tahoe News*. “I can listen so when the plan goes through in whatever form I could help with specific projects that the community wants. I will be part of helping in any way.”

She wants to set up town hall meetings and/or coffees to hear what the residents of Meyers want.

“There are structural and design standards; what do we want for our roadways; if people want the bus station moved, I want to help. There are a lot of things in that plan,” Novasel said.

Once the plan is adopted, Novasel wants to be an integral part of moving it forward.

The supervisors will be having their annual Tahoe meeting on Aug. 31 starting at 9am at Lake Tahoe Airport. The Meyers Area Plan is anticipated to be one of the topics.

Novasel recognizes the frustrations constituents have with her not being able to vote on the Meyers plan, but it's the law. She pointed out, though, that everyone in the county is represented by five electeds – not just one. And then each vote carries the same weight.

Her inability to vote on the Meyers plan will also carry over to the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board. However, the county has an alternate for that board.

As for the courthouse, the 88,000-square-foot facility is slated to be built on land owned by El Dorado County adjacent to the existing county jail just off Forni Road in Placerville as well as on an adjoining 5.2 acres owned by John Briggs, father of former El Dorado County Supervisor Ron Briggs, grandfather of ex-Placerville Planning Commissioner Brian Briggs and father-in-law of Superior Court Judge Steve Bailey.

Novasel & Schwarte Investments Inc. has loaned money to the Briggs Family Trust. This is the company her husband is a part owner and principal of. The supervisor has never worked for the company, but because she financially benefits from the company there is a conflict of interest that prevents her from voting on the courthouse issue. Since her election last November, she has had to recuse herself once.

While the company is incorporated in Nevada, it has filed the paperwork to exist in California as a foreign corporation. This keeps everything legal. The main office is in Meyers, with a branch in Zephyr Cove. Kelly Krolicki, step-daughter of Dick Schwarte, is part of this company. She is married to Brian Krolicki, former lieutenant governor of Nevada. All of the vetting of this financial company has been done multiple times because of Brian Krolicki's various political offices.