

Congress considers treating wildfire like other natural disasters

By Elizabeth Shogren, High Country News

As the West girds itself for what looks likely to be a fierce wildfire season, a bipartisan group of Western senators is pushing a bill to rethink the way the federal government pays to fight catastrophic fires. The idea is that the largest wildfires would be treated like natural disasters. As with big hurricanes or earthquakes, funding for them wouldn't have to come from an agency's regular budget.

As HCN has reported, for seven of the last 12 years, wildfires have been so costly that the Forest Service ran through its fire budget in late summer, long before the season was over and had to raid other programs to keep fighting fires. The problem is so well known it's got its own nickname, "fire borrowing."

Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell warned a Senate committee this week that there's a 90 percent chance his agency will have to do that again this year. The drought and low snowpack across much of the West contribute to the forecast for a bad fire season this year. Tidwell said that with global warming, fire seasons could be expected to be longer – 80 days longer than they were just 15 years ago – and fiercer.

Read the whole story

WHS, STHS ranked among best high schools

By Robert Morse, U.S. News & World Report

To produce the 2015 Best High Schools rankings, *U.S. News & World Report* teamed with North Carolina-based RTI International, a global nonprofit social science research firm.

RTI implemented the *U.S. News* comprehensive rankings methodology, which is based on these key principles: that a great high school must serve all of its students well, not just those who are college bound, and that it must be able to produce measurable academic outcomes to show it is successfully educating its student body across a range of performance indicators.

We started by reviewing 29,070 public high schools in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Some of those schools had to be eliminated from consideration, mainly because they were too small to be analyzed. This reduced the count to 19,753, which is the total number of public high schools across the country that had high enough 12th-grade enrollment and/or sufficient enrollment in other grades during the 2012-13 school year to be eligible for the rankings.



Whittell and South Tahoe high schools made *U.S. News & World Report's* list of top high schools. Whittell has a national ranking of 894 and is No. 3 in Nevada. Nationally, STHS comes in at No. 1,213, in California it is No.

Read the whole story

Nev. to pay millions for storm-water runoff prevention

By Sean Whaley, Las Vegas Review-Journal

CARSON CITY – The cost of complying with an Environmental Protection Agency audit that found failures by the Nevada Transportation Department in addressing storm water runoff issues is coming due at \$10 million for 42 new agency positions, equipment and travel.

Another \$3 million will be spent on storm water upgrades at 15 highway maintenance facilities and more training for agency staff to comply with provisions of the federal Clean Water Act.

In all, 68 positions will be established to deal with the storm water issue, state lawmakers were told in a budget hearing last week.

In a site inspection of two facilities in Sparks and Lake Tahoe in November, EPA officials identified continuing problems, including the potential of dirty water runoff at the agency's maintenance facility at Spooner Summit at Lake Tahoe that could have made its way into Lake Tahoe. A similar concern was identified at a parking lot at the Sparks facility that could affect the Truckee River.

Read the whole story

Nevada slips in ranking for pre-K access

By Neal Morton, Las Vegas Review-Journal

Bucking a national trend of states increasing their investment for pre-kindergarten programs, Nevada continued to lose ground in its percentage of children enrolled and per-child spending in early childhood education.

A new study from the National Institute for Early Education Research found Nevada fell one position to 37th among 41 states for its level of access to quality early childhood education.

Only 3.8 percent of 4-year-olds in Nevada were enrolled in pre-K last year, according to the report. Nevada serves no 3-year-olds.

Read the whole story

Taxes a conundrum for pot

industry

By Jack Healy, New York Times

DENVER — Money was pouring into Bruce Nassau's five Colorado marijuana shops when his accountant called with the bad news: The 2014 tax season was approaching, and Mr. Nassau could not rely on the galaxy of deductions that other businesses use to reduce their tax bills. He was going to owe the Internal Revenue Service a small fortune.

"I had to write a check for \$275,000," Mr. Nassau said. "Unbelievable."

The country's rapidly growing marijuana industry has a tax problem. Even as more states embrace legal marijuana, shops say they are being forced to pay crippling federal income taxes because of a decades-old law aimed at preventing drug dealers from claiming their smuggling costs and couriers as business expenses on their tax returns.

Read the whole story

Brown expected to boost school spending

By Associated Press

Lawmakers expect Gov. Jerry Brown to suggest spending more tax dollars on public schools and community colleges while asking for more money to be set aside for a rainy day when he releases his updated budget this week.

But with a growing \$3 billion surplus, Democrats who control the Legislature will jockey to increase funding for child care, higher education and other social programs.

Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins said those areas have suffered spending cuts over the last decade and while lawmakers “know we’re not going to get everything we want,” she and other Democratic leaders “expect good news.”

Brown already has proposed a record \$113 billion general fund spending plan, but he’s revising that upward as the state has collected more revenue.

California’s budget has benefited from the recovering economy and temporary tax increases. It’s not clear if that boost will continue, since much of it has come from taxes on capital gains and large corporate bonuses.

And as the state takes drastic steps to conserve water amid the ongoing drought, Brown could propose higher spending to expand water supplies and fight wildfires.

Already this year, the Democratic governor has signed emergency legislation authorizing \$1 billion for water infrastructure, including flood control and water recycling, and other programs.

Senate Democrats now are pushing Brown to spend more on water delivery upgrades and wastewater reuse. Republicans want to speed dam construction.

In addition to water spending, Atkins anticipates about \$1 billion in extra discretionary spending that could go toward social programs.

Brown, however, is skeptical. “I’d like them to show it to me, that’d be very interesting,” he said last week.

The governor, early in his final term, has been determined to maintain some of California’s surplus. That restraint has

created an odd dynamic that has generally left Republicans pleased and members of his own party disappointed.

By voter-approved law, the state must spend the lion's share of the surplus on public schools and filling California's savings fund.

But Democrats, who control both houses of California's Legislature and don't need Republican support to pass the budget, are reiterating their desire for child care and higher education spending.

Advocates, meanwhile, have been pushing to restore pay cut during the recession for providers who treat Medi-Cal patients. Senate Democrats want health care for immigrants in the country illegally. And Atkins, a San Diego Democrat, has proposed an income tax credit for low-income, working families.

Sen. Mark Leno, a San Francisco Democrat who chairs the Senate's budget committee, said the majority party is hoping for more discretionary spending, but he also wants to tame expectations. During the last budget cycle, the state increased funding for free preschool and daycare for low-income families, but not as much as Democrats wanted.

"I don't want to promise you things that I can't deliver," he told a crowd of mothers and childcare providers who rallied at the Capitol for increased state subsidies last week.

Bernadette Yabadi, 45, who emigrated from Congo to Santa Rosa with her family five years ago, was among hundreds of parents advocating for more funding. Yabadi, who was a public defender in her home country, said she would love to have childcare for her 2-year-old son, Peter.

"I need to work," Yabadi said, "and help out my family."

Both Democrats and Republicans are pleased to be able to

increase public school funding, though GOP members and some Democrats want tenure reforms in light of a court ruling that struck down teacher job protections.

In January, Brown proposed increasing per pupil spending by 3 percent, from \$9,300 this year to \$9,600 next year, and he proposed increasing community college funding by more than \$500 per student, an 8 percent increase.

Those figures are expected to go even higher when he releases his budget Thursday.

Common Core not up to code in Nevada

By Ian Whitaker, Las Vegas Sun

The debut of computerized Common Core tests in Nevada has been a disaster.

State and school district officials watched helplessly for more than a week as problems with the testing company's servers prevented thousands of students from logging on to take the Smarter Balanced Assessment. In Clark County, efforts to rearrange busy school schedules to take the federally mandated test were in vain as nonstop problems forced the district to halt testing indefinitely.

In California, a million students took the same test without a hitch.

So what went wrong here?

Most education officials in Nevada blame Measured Progress,

the state-contracted testing company tasked with hosting the test on its servers and collecting the results for analysis.

Read the whole story

Tahoe Paradise Park on unsure footing

By Kathryn Reed

MEYERS – There is no one to do maintenance, mow the lawn or book events at Tahoe Paradise Park.

This is because the board fired Steve Dunn, the park manager.

“It was a personnel issue,” Sue Novasel, Tahoe Paradise Resort Improvement District chairwoman, told *Lake Tahoe News*. She would not go into specifics about why Dunn was ousted last month from a job he had had for more than a decade.

Most of the board is new, with Judy Clot the veteran having been on the board since 2007. The others – Novasel, Joe Cardinale, Victor Babbitt, and Peter Nelligan – have been on the board less than a year.

Concerns have arisen with Dunn making money on the side. At a board meeting he admitted he bought chairs that he would lease to wedding parties. He was supposed to be the keeper of all the district’s records, but the board is having a hard time getting their hands on everything.



Tahoe Paradise Park's board is running the facility without a manager. Photo/LTN

Part of Dunn's financial package included living in a house on-site for free. He took in a base salary of more than \$30,000 a year. However, he was also entitled to 30 percent of every wedding that was booked as well as 30 percent from other group rental fees that were collected.

For the most part this was a seasonal job with a year-round salary. Dunn has until May 16 to move out. Novasel told *Lake Tahoe News* no board member has been inside the house to know what kind of condition it is in. Members aren't sure of the exact square footage and don't know what they could collect if they were to rent it or just to know the value if it were to be part of compensation package again.

Taxpayer dollars through Measure S – the recreation bond passed in 2000 – paid for a new roof and gas heater for that house.

In 2006 El Dorado County Auditor-Controller Joe Harn audited the Measure S books.

"The only unusual expenditures our examination has revealed to date related to the construction and acquisition fund by the Tahoe Paradise Resort Improvement District," Harn wrote in a

June 26, 2006, letter to then county Supervisor Norma Santiago, who was on the TPRID board. TPRID had spent nearly \$30,000 on a skid steer loader and snowblower and \$4,300 to replace the roof.

The district receives \$50,000 a year from Measure S/R. In the last year it has received an additional \$10,000 from the bond measure.

Today, the district is grappling with how to go forward. The board agreed last week to solicit bids for landscaping, event planning and camp host. (Board member Nelligan is in charge of getting information from perspective workers; he is at 209.985.8776.)

The camp host idea was brought up as a way to have someone at the park on a regular basis at little or no expense.

The board hopes to take action on those items at the May 28 meeting.

What to do about maintenance issues will first be addressed by a subcommittee and then brought back to the full board at the end of the month.

A brigade of volunteers is also being sought so some of the work is done in house without a check needing to be written.

"We are looking at other models and seeing where we go next," Novasel said in regards to the caretaker's house.

The bulk of the May 8 board meeting centered on how to get at least some of the work done that Dunn had been doing. The short-term answer is hiring multiple individuals. The long-term solution is still to be decided.

Also to be decided is if the park will continue to be in the wedding business. Some board members and park users believe the clubhouse should be used more for locals. But weddings are a revenue source, so others question the logic of turning off

that cash spigot.

Calif. pool, hot tub filling bans have industries steaming

By Nicholas Weiler, San Jose Mercury News

It's hard to imagine a California summer without long days lounging by the pool. But as unprecedented drought sears the state, the backyard swimming pool has become a target for cities desperate to save water.

As cities and water districts put the squeeze on water users, even pool lovers are canceling construction contracts. Pool builders are steamed, accusing water officials of stressing symbolism over science. And contractors are getting increasingly creative in finding sources of water for pools that cities won't fill.

The new restrictions – largely the result of Gov. Jerry Brown's order to cut water use 25 percent statewide – have become a nightmare for pool builders and hot tub retailers.

Read the whole story

SLT woman dies in plane crash

in Mexico

By Janene Scully, Noozhawk

A fundraiser and memorial are being planned for a former employee at Skydive Santa Barbara at the Lompoc Airport after she died in a plane crash last week in Mexico.

Robin Ballachey, 33, was one of two women reportedly killed when a Cessna 180 plane crashed off the coast of Puerto Vallarta, Mexico.

Ballachey, who is from South Lake Tahoe, lived in Pismo Beach and had previously worked for Skydive Santa Barbara for a couple of years starting in November 2012 and staying until late last year.

Read the whole story