

Deerfield Lodge fire cause may never be known

What caused the fire that resulted in millions of dollars of damage to the Deerfield Lodge in South Lake Tahoe last month may always be a mystery.

"I'm not sure if we will ever know what it was," Fire Chief Jeff Meston told *Lake Tahoe News*. "We know it started by the stairwell in the back of the building."

He said the cause of about 25 percent of fires is never determined.

The fast moving fire forced three dozen guests to be evacuated. Some lost everything they were traveling with. The community came to their rescue by providing lodging, food vouchers, clothing and things to do to take their mind off the tragedy.

The owners of the Ski Run Boulevard property, who live out of state, plan to rebuild. Right now they are working through insurance issues.

While fire investigators found the sprinklers to be turned off, there had been an inspection earlier this year that found them to be in working order.

Who turned them off and when remain unknown. While it is easy to turn them off, it could not be done so accidentally.

Meston said it is hard to know if the sprinklers had been working, if it would have made much of a difference because the fire started outside.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Congress on recess without addressing fire funding

By Cliff Weathers, AlterNet

Congress is heading home for summer vacation, failing to act on emergency funding to combat the wildfires that are raging in the West.

President Obama had requested \$615 million in emergency funding to help the U.S. Forest Service and Interior Department pay for firefighting efforts, and the Democratic-controlled Senate proposed a \$2.7 billion spending bill to deal with the wildfires and the influx of unaccompanied minors along the Southwest border. But Senate Republicans used a procedural objection to block its consideration. The House did not introduce a bill to combat wildfires.

Although Congress returns next month, the fire season in some states will have passed its peak.

Ironically, without emergency funding from Congress, the Forest Service and Interior Department will need to transfer money from elsewhere in their budgets, including funds earmarked to remove flammable vegetation from forests, projects that help prevent such fires from raging in the first place.

The two federal agencies have budgeted over \$1 billion for firefighting this year – five times more than 20 years ago – but that may not be enough.

Wildfires are currently raging through the Pacific Northwest and California, in regions that have been affected by

unseasonably warm temperatures and drought. The long-range forecast in the region calls for above-average temperatures through October, which can translate into fuels that are much drier than usual.

Fires continue to rage in Oregon, and communities in the southwestern part of the state are being asked to evacuate their homes, as fire spreads along the border with California. Some 5,300 acres in the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument have been scorched and the town of Ashland, just to its east, is threatened by the fire. Meanwhile, lightning has sparked two new large wildfires in the state.

About 780 square miles of land is currently burning in Oregon, and a continued heat wave, along with forecasted lightning storms, are expected to bring more fires to the region.

Fires in central Washington, which have raged since early July, are threatening the state's famous orchards at the time apple harvest begins.

Read the whole story

Barton to receive full Medicare reimbursement

Barton Health will be getting its full Medicare reimbursement from the Hospital-Acquired Condition Reduction program.

There had been some doubt earlier this summer if that was going to happen

Barton Memorial Hospital will actually receive an additional 0.5 percent in Medicare reimbursement for its high performance

scores in patient care. The higher reimbursement will be allocated from October 2014 through September 2015.

In a separate assessment, Barton Memorial Hospital has also received notification that it will not receive a penalty from the CMS's Hospital-Acquired Condition Reduction Program, as erroneously speculated by Kaiser Health News.

"We are pleased, but not surprised that Barton is a high-performer," Clint Purvance, Barton's chief medical officer, said in a statement. "Our hospital's staff and physicians consider patient safety, quality and patient satisfaction their highest priorities. The time and energy they have invested has greatly improved the outcomes on these measures for the past several years and continues to do so."

Douglas County manager candidates down to 7

By Anne Knowles

MINDEN – Douglas County has narrowed its search for a county manager to seven candidates who spent Aug. 4 in a marathon of panel interviews, culminating in an evening reception for the public at the Carson Valley Inn.

The county received 72 applications for the job vacated in April by Steve Mokrohisky, who left to become county manager in Lane County, Ore.

The field was reduced to the seven now vying for the job based on education, experience and input on the ideal candidate from

the Douglas County Board of Commissioners, said Phil McKenney with Peckham & McKenney, an executive search firm in Roseville, which conducted the search for the county.

The job seekers, who come from Arizona, California, Nebraska and Texas as well as Northern and Southern Nevada, are taking a five-hour community tour this morning and spending the afternoon in individual discussion with the commissioners.

All the candidates have experience in either county or city government or both, and some have worked on water infrastructure issues, a subject that came up often at the informal social for the public.

"Water is the issue that keeps us up at night," Commissioner Greg Lynn said. "Water at the lake is intractable."

Lynn said the county needs \$12 million to fix the water infrastructure at Lake Tahoe, which has multiple, unconnected delivery systems.

Christine Vuletich, assistant county manager and chief financial officer for Douglas and a candidate for county manager, said the county will need \$14 million to replace decades-old worn out water lines.

"We're working closely with the state revolving fund to get below market interest rates and looking for grant opportunities," Vuletich told *Lake Tahoe News*.

"There is some aging infrastructure up there and some bold action is needed," said Tim Hacker, the interim director of parks and recreation for Las Vegas and one of the candidates for county manager.

Charlie Cassens, another candidate, said water and sewer rates are part of the issue. Cassens worked for Lower Colorado River Authority in Austin and Otay Municipal Water District in Spring Valley in San Diego County prior to his current

position as city manager in Lake Havasu City, Ariz.

"My fundamental philosophy is we are a public service agency here to make things as easy as possible for people who want to get things done," Cassens told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Cassens talked about working to get a \$463 million bond measure passed in his current job to build a waste water treatment facility during his brief speech as part of an introduction made by each candidate.

Jim Nichols, former assistant city manager for Midlands, Texas, who is now living in Henderson, has degrees in civil and environmental engineering, which he said helps him understand the challenges facing Lake Tahoe.

"The lake requires environmental attention and I hope I'd be an asset, assuring the lake is protected and preserved for future generations," Nichols told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Other issues that came up were economic development, tourism and the decline in gaming.

"Gaming has gone down and that's a challenge for jobs and for revenue for the county," said Rick Benson, currently county administrative officer for Mariposa County. "It's a big challenge to fill that void."

Prior to Mariposa County, Benson worked in Kern County, home of Bakersfield, which he says is diverse area like Douglas County, containing desert, farming and a city.

"It's always a balancing act, that's the challenge of a county," Benson said. "Everybody deserves a full slate of services no matter where they are."

Mary Lou Brown, city administrator for Grand Island, Neb., said tourism drives the economy at the lake and unites rather than divides the different constituents of the county.

“People in the valley rely on tourism at the lake so they have an interest,” said Brown. “There’s a tie and they care about each other.”

Curtis Calder, currently city manager in Elko, said he’s impressed with Douglas County’s many planning documents which map out a path forward.

“It allows leadership, staff and elected officials, to focus on the highest priorities,” he said, referring to the county’s Economic Vitality Plan and master plan. “Douglas County has a lot of diversity, that’s its strength.”

The seven candidates are scheduled to return Aug. 18 for formal, public interviews with the Board of Commissioners, which is set to announce its selection on Sept. 4.

The goal is to have a new county manager in place in October.

Oily rag causes house fire in Truckee

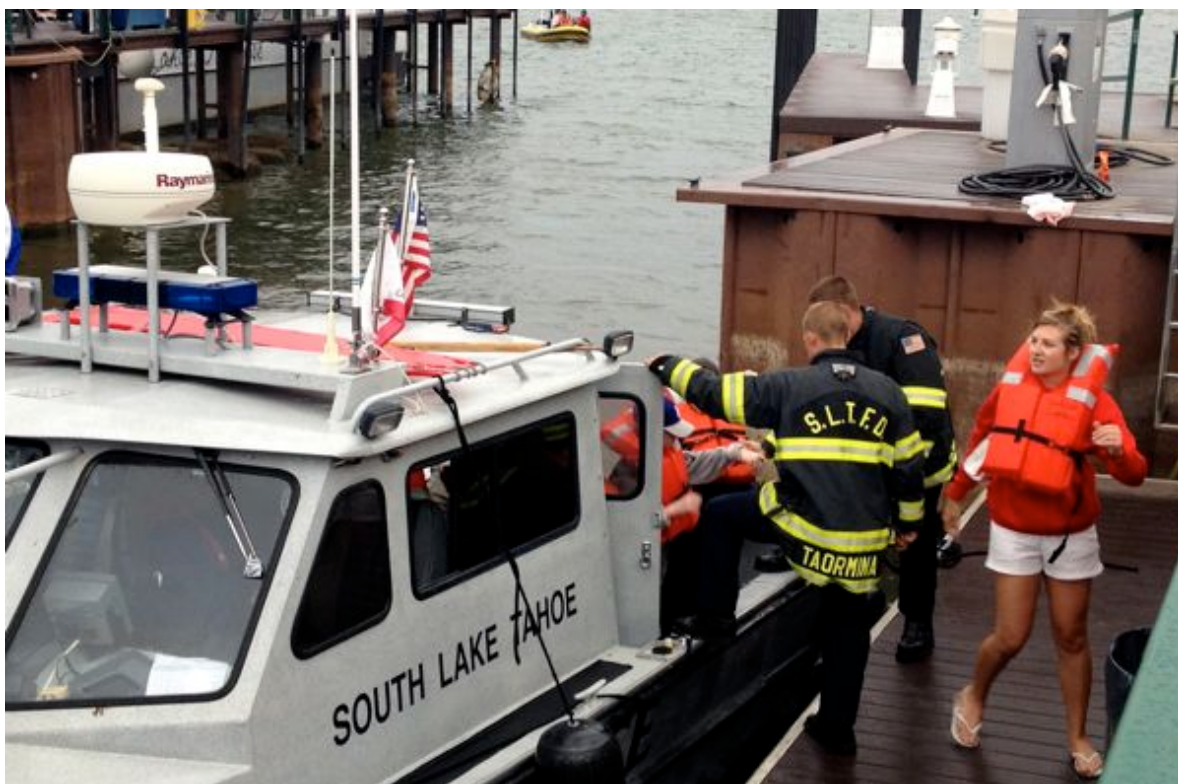
A house in Truckee was destroyed Aug. 3 when an oily rag spontaneously combusted.

No one was hurt in the 1:10am blaze on Martis Valley Road.

The rag had been place in a confined area.

In addition to significant damage to the house, two vehicles in the garage were charred.— *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Tahoe Queen runs aground with 257 on board



Passengers get off a rescue boat at Ski Run Marina after the Tahoe Queen ran aground Aug. 4. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

About 300 people had to be shuttled from the Tahoe Queen to shore in rescue boats on Monday afternoon.

The paddle-wheeler was about 30 minutes into its 90-minute voyage Aug. 4 when it hit a sandbar off Regan Beach in South Lake Tahoe. Fire officials estimated it to be about 600 yards from shore.

No injuries have been reported. There were 257 passengers on board and then the crew.

“It’s premature to speculate how this happened,” Dave Freirich, spokesman for Aramark, told *Lake Tahoe News*. Aramark runs the Tahoe Queen out of Ski Run Marina in South Lake Tahoe.

A passenger told *Lake Tahoe News* that the captain said he should have been about 8 feet farther out to miss the sand. Lake Tahoe’s water level is dropping every day as year-three of the drought continues.

Two boats tried to dislodge the Queen, but to no avail. One was the Paradise. It was able to take about 70 people back to the marina, but never went out again.



The Tahoe Queen is about 600 yards from Regan Beach.

Most people were ferried to shore by either El Dorado County sheriff’s, South Lake Tahoe police or fire, U.S. Coast Guard, Vessel Assist or Tahoe Douglas fire boats. Many of them are small and can only take a half dozen people at a time.

However, police and fire officials were not notified about the grounding until people from the boat started calling 911 because they had been sitting on the sandbar for a couple hours, according to Fire Chief Jeff Meston.

“We didn’t get any information,” Carolyn O’Brien told *Lake Tahoe News*. The Lincoln woman was on the Queen for the first time with her husband and two sons.

All they were told is they were stuck. Then the Queen staff

tried to give them a \$17 bill for sodas. They refused to pay it. No food or beverages were offered to passengers.

"We were on board for 3½ hours before anything really happened," Fred O'Callaghan said in terms of rescue boats arriving. The Cambridge, England, resident was on board with his wife and two kids.

The couple said most people on board were well behaved and that only a few seemed to be panicky.

One woman getting off at Ski Run screamed as she had to get out of the small boat. But a South Tahoe firefighter wrapped his arms around her to make sure she was safe and didn't fall into the water.

It had been a rough ride. The temperature was dropping, the wind blowing at about 15 mph, sprinkles falling and the white caps bouncing boats along.

Freirich, with the boat company, said the Queen would be staying the night off shore.

"I can't say for certain someone will be staying with the boat, but it will be monitored. It's grounded pretty good," Freirich said.

He didn't know if the boat will be inspected in the lake, towed to Ski Run once it's dislodged or if damages would be assessed at the marina.

No agreement on what to do after a fire

By Scott Smith, AP

GROVELAND, Calif. — Nearly a year since a historic wildfire charred a huge swath of California's High Sierra, debate rages over what to do with millions of dead trees left in its wake: truck them to lumber mills or let nature to take its course?

One side argues that the blackened dead trees and new growth beneath them already sprouting to life create vital habitat for dwindling birds such as spotted owls and black-backed woodpeckers. Others say time is running out on a golden opportunity to salvage timber to pay for replanting and restoring the forest.

It's a classic standoff between environmentalists and supporters of the timber industry, which contends dead trees and brush pose a new fire hazard.

The U.S. Forest Service is expected to unveil its final decision in the coming weeks on how much of the land burned by the wildfire, known as the Rim Fire, can be logged.

"It's not always possible to please everybody," said Robert Bonnie, the U.S. Department of Food and Agriculture's Undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment. He oversees the Forest Service.

Bonnie declined to say how many trees the Forest Service will allow loggers to haul away in the plan being drafted, but he said the goal is to balance the forest's health with the needs of the local community.

"We try and do our best with the science we have," he said.

The blaze ignited on Aug. 17, 2013, when a hunter lost control

of his campfire. For two months, flames raced across 400 square miles of the Stanislaus National Forest, Yosemite National Park's backcountry and private timber land. It ranks as California's third-largest wildfire and the largest in the Sierra Nevada's recorded history.

Loggers have already begun removing a small portion of dead trees along roads so motorists aren't hurt by falling timber. A much more aggressive logging project is under consideration, targeting nearly 50 square miles of forest land.

Environmentalists said they are alarmed by the prospect of logging.

"For us, post-fire logging is the last and worst thing you should ever do in a forest," said Chad Hanson, a forest ecologist and founder of the John Muir Project, an environmentalist group. "The scientific community is so strongly against this."

Intense fires create snag forests that are three times as rare as living, old-growth forests, he said. Wood-boring beetles lay eggs in the dead trees, spawning larvae that become food for the woodpeckers. Flowering plants and shrubs sprouting on the forest floor attract small, flying insects for bats and other animals that the spotted owl swoops in to eat, Hanson said.

Bird species have come back strongly in the burned areas that could be logged, Hanson said. In a recent visit, he pointed to conifer seedlings two to three inches tall sprouting up as a result of the fire. He worries that heavy logging tractors dragging out dead trees will destroy the seedlings.

Hanson questioned the Forest Service's motives for proposing logging.

"When they call it a recovery effort, they're talking a recovery of revenue, not a recovery of the forest," he said.

The national forests are not wildlife preserves, countered Steve Brink of the California Forestry Association, who represents the timber industry. National forests are set aside for many uses, including timber production, he said.

Selling the trees will pay for restoring the forest, creating jobs in a region of California where logging once flourished, Brink said. Removing the burned trees will allow for the forests to be reopened more quickly for public use, he said, noting that the natural regeneration could take a century or two and, in the meantime, shrub brush would dominate.

The dead trees will fall across each other on top of the shrubs, creating prime fire conditions, said Brink, taking a position that environmentalists say has no scientific foundation.

The dead trees can be logged for about two years after a fire and then they disintegrate, losing value as timber, Brink said. He fears that environmentalists will file lawsuits to run out the clock if the Forest Service's decision doesn't suit them, he said.

In July, wildlife advocates sued the Forest Service, arguing that officials have failed to protect spotted owls and black-backed woodpeckers from logging of burned trees in other parts of the Sierra.

"They know if they can stall the process, the brush wins, deterioration will take over – and they win," Brink said.

Parts of Yosemite National Park backcountry that burned in the Rim Fire reopened in April with a warning that visitors should be careful of falling trees. The trees that fell across roads were removed, but logging is not allowed in the park, Yosemite spokesman Scott Gediman said.

Craig Pedro, the administrator of Tuolumne County, said he is worried about logging trucks flooding the roads and causing

traffic hazards. But community leaders are united behind anything that brings the forest back to life sooner rather than later, Pedro said.

The local economy depends on people coming to fish in the streams, hunt deer and pick mushrooms, he said, adding that much of the forest is still closed with no end in sight.

Bay Area couple dies boating at Lake Tahoe

A San Ramon couple died early Sunday when the boat they were in struck a pier near Meeks Bay.

Tatiana Nikolskaya, 44, and Vadim Raizanov, 45, died on impact.

"The hull of the boat was split in half from the force of the impact. The possibility that alcohol may have been a factor is being investigated and autopsies are scheduled for early this week," El Dorado County sheriff's deputies said.

The accident occurred Aug. 3 at 1:40am. A group of people had been sleeping on the dock and were awakened by the impact of the crash.

The boat was a 19-foot 1997 Glastron. Deputies said it was traveling at a high rate of speed.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Drought conditions can spread Valley fever

By Sammy Caiola, Sacramento Bee

Don Hopkins, a former Davis police officer and professional ballroom dancer, is having some trouble staying on his feet.

Hopkins, 67, is still physically drained from an early May trip to Mercy Hospital at Folsom, where doctors pumped him with pneumonia antibiotics for more than a week before accurately diagnosing his Valley fever.

As Hopkins' temperature soared and he began to hallucinate, his wife, Lizette, insisted the doctors test for the disease, which is historically more prevalent in the southern Central Valley. Though Hopkins' test results would surprise many in the Sacramento region, experts say the fever is not constrained to the south state and can be carried to other regions via travelers and drought conditions.

"When doctors see somebody with what they think is pneumonia, they immediately give them antibiotic," said Hopkins, who lives in the El Dorado County foothills. "Often the patient gets worse and the doctors don't think about Valley fever. It can basically disable a person for the rest of their life."

Valley fever is caused by a species of fungus called *coccidioides*, which lives in the soil in Southern California, Arizona, Mexico and parts of Central America and can be brought to the surface by construction, agricultural work and other activities that disrupt the terrain, said Dr. George Thompson, director of the Coccidioidomycosis Serology Lab at the UC Davis Medical Center.

Read the whole story

Gallons of potable water down the drain



Lakeside Park Water Company let its water run into a South Lake Tahoe street for about 36 hours.. Photo/LTN

Updated Aug. 3 9:45pm

A landscaping water line ruptured this weekend in South Lake Tahoe, spewing unknown gallons of water down the drain.

Lakeside Park Water Company was going to wait until Monday to fix the leak on Pine Boulevard, but city officials said it was imperative they fix it ASAP. The water had been obviously going into the gutter and buckling the sidewalk since early Aug. 2. The line was fixed about 36 hours later.

It meant customers near the state line being without water from 2-6:30pm Aug. 3 while the repairs were made. It is not known how many were without water, but a number of hotels were affected.

“Upon investigation it is a landscaping irrigation line. We will confirm ownership in the morning,” City Manager Nancy

Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News* on Aug. 3.

Lakeside officials are confident it is a city-owned water line.

“It is a city line on city property; a fact that apparently escaped the city,” Jack McLaughlin, president of Lakeside Park Association, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The city has vegetated drainage basins throughout town, so this could be what was being irrigated.

While McLaughlin didn’t have the number of gallons that were lost, he said, “It wasn’t a lot of water, it wasn’t a major break.”

– Kathryn Reed