

Dry conditions create winter fire threat

By Joseph Serna, Los Angeles Times

California is bracing for what officials fear could be an unprecedented winter fire season fueled by record dry conditions that show no signs of letting up.

January is typically a time when forest fire camps and air bases are closed and seasonal firefighters go home. But not this year. Calfire has responded to 150 wildfires so far. During the same period last January, there were none, and the historic average is 25.

Across California, vegetation that typically rehydrates with rain between December and April continues to get dryer and more dangerous. The fires so far this winter have been relatively moderate compared with some of the state's largest, but officials worry that the fires will get worse as the fuel gets even dryer. Forecasters say there is little relief in sight. The National Weather Service last week released a forecast for the southwestern United States calling for unseasonably dry and hot conditions.

Read the whole story

Placer supes keep Kings Beach academy alive

Placer County Board of Supervisors on Jan. 21 voted 5-0 to deny an interim urgency ordinance.

County staff had recommended approval of the ordinance to stop the Tahoe Expedition Academy in Kings Beach from going forward. It is proposed to go on the lakefront property where Ferrari Crown Motel, Falcon Lodge and Goldcrest Resort properties are.

The item was originally going to be discussed at the Jan. 7 meeting in Auburn, but public outcry got it moved to the Kings Beach meeting on Tuesday.

The agenda item read, "Notice is hereby given that the Placer County Board of Supervisors will conduct a public hearing, on the date and time noted above, to consider adoption of an interim ordinance prohibiting certain uses, including hospitals, day care centers/preschools, churches/religious assembly (TRPA New Definition), schools – business and vocational, schools – college, schools – kindergarten through secondary, animal husbandry services, collection stations, single-family residences, service stations, auto repair and services, and contract construction services within Plan Area Statement 001A, Special Areas No. 1 through No. 5 of the Tahoe City Community Plan, Plan Area Statement 029, Special Areas No. 1, No. 2 and No. 4 of the Kings Beach Community Plan Area, and Plan Area Statement 032 of the North Stateline Community Plan Area."

The ordinance would have created a 45-day moratorium to stop processing applications for the above uses.

County staff wants this piece of prime real estate to be used for a more tourist-oriented business. Plus, the academy would not be consistent with the area plan that is wending its way through the regulatory approval process.

There could be financial implications for Kings Beach and Placer County if it were to lose transient occupancy tax dollars as well as other dollars overnight visitors spend compared to day trippers.

Dave Ferrari, whose family has operated the hotel business for more than 60 years, told the board, “We simply ask that you acknowledge our long-held property rights and vote no.”

While the academy cleared this obstacle, it is far from a done deal. County and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency approval are still needed.

The proposed academy has scheduled informational meetings for Feb. 12 and March 19 from 6-7:30pm at North Tahoe Event Center in Kings Beach.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Swanson cleared of bribery allegation

By Kathryn Reed

The bribery investigation involving South Lake Tahoe City Councilwoman Angela Swanson is over. No charges will be filed.

“At this time we don’t believe Mrs. Swanson intended on a criminal act,” Dave Stevenson, investigator with the El Dorado County District Attorney’s Office, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Swanson has been under suspicion since August 2012 when Gino DiMatteo, then owner of City of Angels II medical marijuana dispensary, was arrested on a slew of drug charges. He implicated Swanson in a bribery case, claiming she would vote a certain way if he supplied cash to a charity she was involved with.



Angela Swanson

Stevenson said the investigation began based on a tip from a source, who wants to be anonymous, saying that there was some criminal wrongdoing going on.

“Throughout our investigation we look at different people and their involvement and their intent and if any laws were violated. Obviously, shortly into the investigation it was determined that Mr. DiMatteo had criminal wrongdoing and intent so we veered toward him,” Stevenson said. “That took a lot of time. Once it was completed, we focused on if anyone else was involved in criminal intent.”

DiMatteo pleaded guilty Jan. 9, 2013, to possession with the intent to distribute marijuana. He was sentenced to five years in prison. During the investigation it was uncovered that DiMatteo should never have been allowed to open a pot shop because he was a felon. But South Lake Tahoe officials never did a criminal background check on him.

“Ultimately, our investigation has concluded and found that while it is clear that Mr. DiMatteo believed he was attempting to bribe Councilmember Swanson, it is equally clear that the councilmember already intended to vote favorably for Mr. DiMatteo and his marijuana dispensary,” District Attorney Vern Pierson said in letter to South Lake Tahoe councilmembers.

Swanson’s vote for medical marijuana has been consistent since she has been on the council.

The bribery issue stems from Swanson and Nancy Rollston, the head of the Lake Tahoe Educational Foundation, accepting more than \$1,000 in cash for the foundation from DiMatteo that was delivered in an unmarked brown bag. This was just prior to vote of the council involving DiMatteo. (Despite its being drug money, the foundation has never returned it. Swanson is on the nonprofit's board.)

Swanson always maintained her innocence and has said there was nothing wrong with accepting that money. She did not respond to multiple inquiries.

A bit of potential irony is Swanson is running for El Dorado County supervisor and would be in a position to have some say over the District Attorney's Office, at least budget-wise. And Pierson is up for re-election this year.

Man accused of stealing rental car from Tahoe airport

A San Jose man was arrested in South Lake Tahoe after allegedly stealing a rental car after first reportedly tampering with an aviation fuel truck.

Anthony Dixon, 22, was booked the afternoon of Jan. 19 on charges of vehicle theft, vandalism, and felony trespass on an airport. Federal charges are possible because of infractions at Lake Tahoe Airport.

Additionally, possible federal violations may be pursued because the incident occurred at the airport.

A Calstar employee called police about a suspicious male who

had tampered with the fuel truck. The suspect drove north on the tarmac in a stolen sedan that was abandoned on Melba Avenue. He fled on foot.

Two hours later a resident on Susquehanna Drive who reported a suspicious person near their residence. It turned out to be suspect from the airport.

Police are not releasing how the suspect got access to the tarmac or rental vehicle.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

EPA's process to OK pesticides raises health concerns

By Katia Savchuk, Center for Investigative Reporting

Tiny particles of silver could appear soon in children's toys and clothing, embedded inside plastics and fabrics to fight stains and odors.

No one knows how the germ-killing particles, part of a new pesticide called Nanosilva, affect human health or the environment in the long run. But regulators have proposed letting Nanosilva on the market for up to four years before the manufacturer has to submit studies on whether the particles pose certain dangers.

That's because the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has backed approving Nanosilva through conditional registration, a fast-track process that recently has drawn criticism for

oversight problems. Unlike regular registration, it allows a pesticide to be sold before all required safety studies are in. In this case, manufacturer Nanosilva LLC can move ahead even though it hasn't explored fully the potential health risks if the product were to seep out of plastic or be inhaled.

Nanosilva's approval, which could be finalized early this year, has renewed focus on the loophole, designed mainly to help the EPA speed up approvals of pesticides nearly identical to those already being sold.

Recent reviews have found vast problems with the EPA's oversight of conditional registration. An internal audit showed in 2011 that 70 percent of all active pesticides had been conditionally approved. The audit also concluded that the agency used the label too broadly. Since then, its use has increased. Figures the EPA provided in December put the number at 80 percent.

Thousands of pesticides kept conditional status for more than 20 years, the Natural Resources Defense Council, a nonprofit environmental advocacy group, found in 2010. The EPA says studies typically are due within four years.

And last year, federal auditors found the agency couldn't reliably track how many products were conditionally registered or whether safety studies were submitted. As a result, pesticides could linger on the market for years without critical tests, the Government Accountability Office warned in August.

These aren't new problems. At least seven independent reviews dating back to 1980 have noted flaws with the agency's systems for tracking pesticide registrations.

The EPA said it has enough data on Nanosilva to know that it's safe while the manufacturer finishes testing, as the law requires. But some scientists and environmentalists say the

agency is taking a risk on products that are hardly essential, like sports clothing that doesn't stain or stink or toys that last longer.

"You could allow some uses that are justified based on human well-being, such as medical implements, but to allow the possibility that nanosilver would be released in plastic on children's toys, and your kid could chew on it and ingest that material before we understand its toxicity – that's unnecessary risk," said Samuel Luoma, a research ecologist at the University of California, Davis. "It doesn't make any sense."

Conventional silver has been used as an antibacterial product for centuries. It releases ions that are deadly for many bacteria and fungi.

Recently, scientists have broken down silver into particles more than 1,000 times smaller than the width of a human hair – some not much wider than a DNA strand. They're called nanosilver. Nanosilva is just one brand that contains them.

Nanosilver can be embedded directly into plastics, fabrics and other materials. Companies say this helps products last longer. It also allows them to call items antibacterial and attract germ-conscious consumers. Nanosilver needs to be registered as a pesticide because it claims to kill bacteria and other live organisms.

Regular silver is highly toxic to fish and other aquatic life but isn't usually dangerous for humans. But scientists say nanosilver could pose unique hazards, and they know little about its long-term risks.

Animal studies show that nanosilver can slip into cells and build up in the brain, heart and other organs. The EPA doesn't know whether nanosilver causes reproductive harm or cancer because there are no valid studies. Research on animals suggests that it can collect in the male reproductive system,

potentially harming fertility, and may cause genetic mutations, which sometimes are linked to cancer.

Scientists have warned that nanosilver may be more toxic than regular silver and act as a carrier for other poisonous chemicals. Besides human health risks, researchers worry that nanosilver could kill fish and disrupt food chains if it makes its way into the environment.

The EPA argues that approving Nanosilva promotes innovation and lets consumers enjoy better products. The agency also says it didn't give the manufacturer enough time to do safety tests. The EPA didn't ask for those tests until nearly four years after an independent scientific advisory panel counseled the EPA on how it should evaluate nanosilver in 2009.

And, in evaluating Nanosilva, the EPA ignored some of that panel's advice.

The scientists told the agency to evaluate every nanosilver product separately. Just because one is safe doesn't mean others will be, they said. The agency instead figured out many health and environment risks based on studies on particles that were different from those in Nanosilva. The EPA said the tests were "scientifically appropriate."

Nanosilva officials couldn't be reached for comment.

This isn't the first time the EPA has conditionally approved pesticides containing nanosilver.

In November, a federal appeals court overturned the approval of two nanosilver products, ruling that the EPA had incorrectly found they posed no risks to toddlers. That decision didn't affect Nanosilva because the EPA used different calculations in each case.

Regulators still are grappling with how to deal with nanomaterials. While only two companies have asked for EPA

approval, hundreds of products containing nanosilver already are on the market, according to an inventory by The Project on Emerging Nanotechnologies.

The EPA also has fast-tracked other controversial pesticides, including ones linked to the collapse of honeybee colonies and tree deaths.

All conditionally registered pesticides meet legal safety standards, the EPA said. The agency said it's taken steps to prevent staff from coding registrations incorrectly, which it said was the main reason numbers appeared high.

The EPA also has reviewed some conditionally approved products to look for missing data and other problems. But it hasn't traced the paper trail for all pesticides, as it told federal auditors it would do by last fall.

The EPA also doesn't have a concrete plan for the main fix auditors prescribed, an automated tracking system to guarantee that studies arrive and get reviewed. Currently, pesticide managers sometimes rely on handwritten notes and memory to keep track.

"Until they figure out the system, they shouldn't be using conditional registration," said Mae Wu, an attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The EPA first told federal auditors it would develop an automated tracking system more than 25 years ago.

No snow: Barton ER visits on

the rise

Publisher's note: *This is one of a series of blurbs about how the lack of winter is impacting businesses in the Lake Tahoe Basin. If you have an idea, please email it to info@LakeTahoeNews.net.*

One of the businesses that benefits from a bad snow year is a hospital in a ski town. That is because people tend to hurt themselves more when the snowpack is hard or thin and when there are more people on fewer runs.

That's the case at Barton Memorial Hospital. Emergency room visits were up 9 percent in December compared to December 2012. The snowpack in December 2012 was great – even above normal. Not so a month ago.

“Injury patterns are unchanged and, overall, the ski clinics are unchanged from previous years,” Warren Withers, medical director of Barton's emergency department, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Barton runs the medical clinics at Heavenly, Sierra and Kirkwood ski areas.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Nev. drones expected in the air by May

By Richard N. Velotta, Las Vegas Sun

The era of pilotless commercial aircraft has begun in Nevada

and the first drone test flights are expected by May, a team from the state's program management office told the board of the Governor's Office of Economic Development last week.

Details of the plan to grow what is expected to be an \$11 billion-a-year industry were unveiled to a packed board room at Gov. Brian Sandoval's Las Vegas office.

Nevada was notified Dec. 30 that it had been selected one of six states designated by the Federal Aviation Administration to test unmanned aerial systems. The FAA's goal is to integrate unmanned aircraft into the U.S. commercial airspace by the end of September 2015.

Four test sites have been identified in Nevada: a facility at Boulder City Municipal Airport, Stead Airport north of Reno, Fallon's municipal airport and Desert Rock, a private airfield near Mercury associated with the Nevada National Security Site.

Read the whole story

Traumatic brain injury survivors likely to die young

By Alan Zarembo, Los Angeles Times

People who suffer traumatic brain injuries face an elevated risk of death from suicide or accidents for years to come, according to a study based on four decades of data on hundreds of thousand of patients in Sweden.

Those who survived the immediate aftermath of moderate and severe traumatic brain injuries were three times more likely

than people without such injuries to die prematurely, defined by the researchers as before age 56.

Experts said the study was likely to spur calls for long-term monitoring of some brain injury patients. By virtue of its size and scope, the analysis, published Wednesday in JAMA Psychiatry, puts an authoritative stamp on a growing body of evidence that impacts to the brain can be deadly in ways that are not easily apparent.

Read the whole story

Privacy an issue as car gadgets become the norm

By Craig Trudell, Bloomberg

Drivers' privacy needs to be protected by law, said Alan Mulally, chief executive officer of Ford Motor Co., as more vehicles use data for services such as location tracking amid the booming in-car technology market.

The company is "supportive and participating" in talks with regulators who are considering such legislation, Mulally said this week at the Detroit auto show. He countered comments made last week by the automaker's global marketing chief, who said Ford knows when drivers of its vehicles violate traffic laws through global-positioning system data.

Documents released by former government contractor Edward Snowden last year have sparked a firestorm in the U.S. related to data-privacy concerns with technology and telecommunications companies. The comments by Jim Farley,

Ford's executive vice president of global marketing, have directed attention to the car industry as in-vehicle technology becomes more common.

Read the whole story

3D-printed guns may be banned in Calif.

By Jacob Gershman, Wall Street Journal

Prompted by growing concerns by law-enforcement authorities over undetectable 3D-printed guns, California is considering a new law that would make it a crime to assemble a weapon without permission from the state.

A Democratic state lawmaker from Los Angeles pushing a bill that would require anybody who constructs a homemade firearm to first obtain a unique serial number or other identification mark from the state attorney general's office. Within a day of assembly, the number or mark "shall be engraved or permanently affixed to the firearm."

People banned by state or federal law from possessing or owning a firearm would be barred from constructing the weapons. Violators would face up to a year in prison. The state would also be authorized to charge applicants a fee for the registrations.

Read the whole story