Nevada casino mogul wants ban on Internet gaming

By Peter Wallsten and Tom Hamburger, Washington Post

Billionaire casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, whose record-breaking campaign spending in 2012 made him an icon of the new super-donor era, is leveraging that newfound status in an escalating feud with industry rivals over the future of gambling.

Adelson, best known for building upscale casino resorts in Nevada and more recently in Asia, wants to persuade Congress to ban Internet betting. He says the practice is a danger to society and could tarnish the industry's traditional business model.

Nearly all of his competitors, including Caesars Entertainment and MGM Resorts, disagree. They say regulated Internet gambling can be done safely and can boost the industry.

To make his point, Adelson is preparing a public campaign to portray online gambling as a danger to children, the poor and others who could be exploited by easy access to Internet betting.

Three states have moved to legalize online gambling, with New Jersey scheduled to go live this month. At least a dozen others are expected to consider it next year.

Read the whole story

USFS hotshot run over, killed by vehicle

By Bill Lindelof , Sacramento Bee

The California Highway Patrol is investigating the death of a U.S. Forest Service firefighter who appears to have been run over by a car filled with his colleagues on a road in Yuba County over the weekend.

Michael Patrick Kelly II, 32, who served as a squad boss on the Tahoe Hotshots Crew, died about 1:10 a.m. Saturday after being hit on Marysville Road, west of Old Toll Road, not far from Camptonville, the small town where the crew is based, about 36 miles northeast of Marysville.

“This is a tragic loss for Mike’s family, for Tahoe National Forest and for the firefighting community,” said Tahoe Forest Supervisor Tom Quinn in a statement.

A news release from the CHP states that the crash occurred when seven members of the “hot shots” crew were in a 2002 Hyundai Accent sedan traveling westbound on Marysville Road.

At the same time, another vehicle was traveling eastbound toward the crowded Hyundai. The driver of that car saw a pedestrian lying down in the westbound lane.

The driver came to a stop and tried to alert the oncoming Hyundai by flashing the vehicles’s high-beam headlights. The Hyundai, driven by firefighter Andrew Gruenberg, 26, did not stop and ran over Kelly, the CHP statement said.

Read the whole story

Recovery widens income gap in U.S.

By Niraj Chokshi, Washington Post

The income gap in America has been widening for decades and the modest three-year recovery did little to change that, according to Census data.

The new data suggest that despite modest recoveries in many states, the middle class has been shrinking while households have been added in the lowest and highest income brackets. In many states and nationally, the highest income brackets saw more growth than the lowest, but households in the middle brackets continued to decline. The state-by-state data compare incomes from a pair of three-year periods: 2007 through 2009, a span that included the Great Recession, and 2010 through 2012, a period that included the ongoing and modest recovery.

For years, the wealthiest 1 percent have amassed income more quickly than the rest. From 1979 through 2007, for example, the top 1 percent of households saw income grow by 275 percent, according to a nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office study.

Compare that to the bottom fifth of households, which saw income gains of only 18 percent over that time. Recent Nobel Prize winner for economics Robert Shiller, who is known for creating a closely tracked home-price index, last month called income inequality “the most important problem that we are facing now today.” And just last week, President Obama’s nominee to lead the Federal Reserve, Janet Yellen, called income inequality “an extremely difficult and to my mind very worrisome problem.”

Read the whole story

Deputy DA running for El Dorado County judge

By Kathryn Reed

Prosecuting bad guys is what Vicki Ashworth has been doing for the last 16 years. Now she wants to be the judge in those cases.

Ashworth is running for the El Dorado County Superior Court judgeship being vacated by Doug Phimister.

For the past 14 years Ashworth has worked in the El Dorado County District Attorney's Office, and was with the Amador County DA's Office the previous two years. She has spent her time in Placerville handling every type of case possible – from homicides to domestic violence to fraud to sexual assault to general felonies.

Vicki Ashworth

"My career has been devoted to serving the community where I lived, where I raised my children. Being a judge allows me to continue serving my community, but in a different fashion," Ashworth told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Ashworth believes she would be able to easily make the transition from being an advocate for a client to being impartial on the bench.

"What a lot of people don't realize is you do that a lot as a prosecutor. Honestly, before I file a case or settle or decide to go forward to trial, you really do have to look at all the facts," Ashworth said.

She believes her boss, Vern Pierson, is doing a good job and has no desire to run for his seat.

Ashworth would not be the first El Dorado County judge to come from the DA's office. Judges Suzanne Kingsbury and James Wagoner are two who have.

The 43-year-old has had aspirations of being on the bench for at least four years. She went through the Jenny Commission process that scrutinizes judges for possible gubernatorial appointment. She made it through, but then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger picked Curt Stracener.

Kingsbury is the only female judge in the county. Ashworth doesn't fret about going into a male-dominated environment because that's all she's known throughout her professional life.

And she said she is already good at not talking to her husband about work. He's a captain in the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department.

"The most important thing to me is my ethics and my integrity. It's something I've taken very seriously my entire career. It's not something I would jeopardize or put into question," Ashworth said.

Questionable telemarketer goes after repeat donors

By Kendall Taggart, Center for Investigative Reporting

Judith Johnson of Stacyville, Iowa, doesn't get out much anymore.

Legally blind and living on a small Social Security pension, the 72-year-old used to go to church once a week. She stopped out of fear that her new walker would snag on the railroad tracks she had to cross to get there.

But Johnson, whose tiny apartment is decorated with crucifixes, still believes it's her duty to help those less fortunate.

So when telemarketers call on behalf of cancer patients, homeless veterans or disabled firefighters, the retired secretary finds it hard to say no.

That penchant for giving made Johnson the target of America's billion-dollar charity fundraising industry.

In one recent year, callers persuaded her to write 25 checks to 11 different charities.

Telemarketers are being accused of making misleading statements.
Photo/Scott Keeler/Tampa Bay Times

The repeated calls were no fluke.

Each one can be traced back to a single source – Associated Community Services, a Michigan-based company that is one of the nation’s largest charity telemarketing firms.

After Johnson gave to one charity, the firm put her on a list that got her bombarded with calls for nearly a dozen more company clients. Telemarketers sometimes called several times a day.

Johnson told one phone solicitor she couldn’t afford to give to a charity called Children with Hair Loss.

“She said, ‘You’re going to let this poor little child be bald-headed when they’re only 4 years old?’” Johnson recalled. “I really felt bad for the children, so I think I gave her around $10.”

Unbeknownst to Johnson, about $1.75 of that donation made it to the charity. The telemarketing firm pocketed the rest.

Johnson’s story is just like that of millions of Americans who give once over the phone only to find themselves flooded with calls for more causes.

To track how this happens, the *Tampa Bay Times* and the Center for Investigative Reporting scrutinized how a single company, Associated Community Services, operated in one state that has amassed a treasure trove of data.

Reporters interviewed 10 current and former employees and examined internal company documents subpoenaed by the Iowa attorney general. Iowa regulators used the records, which provide a rare glimpse into the inner workings of the charity industry, to build a case against the firm. Earlier this year, a judge in Iowa ordered Associated Community Services to stop soliciting in that state until it fully complied with a subpoena. The telemarketer is appealing the ruling.

In interviews, phone solicitors described the tactics they used to persuade donors to give. Along with the records, which include details about every Iowa donor who gave 10 times or more, their descriptions reveal a deliberate strategy of targeting trusting donors and exploiting their generosity to fuel profits in the name of charity.

From March 2010 through June 2011, nearly 400 Iowans made 10 or more donations to the firm’s charity clients. Total number of donations from the frequent-donor group: more than 5,500, worth a combined $102,000.

Associated Community Services would hit up its most reliable givers dozens of times in a year, with no regard for their age or financial situation.

Calls came so often that nearly half of the repeat donors gave to two different charity clients in a single day.

In an email, company officials said they call people on their hot list randomly and do not purposefully call multiple times a day.

“If the stars aligned properly, it is possible that a potential donor phone number could be called for several charities in one day," President Richard Cole wrote. "But this would be an unusual incident."

Cole also said the company does not target the elderly and has no way of knowing the age or financial situation of the people they call.

But the Iowa attorney general found that most of the company's prolific donors – those who gave 20 times or more – were 69 or older.

The top donor was a man in his 80s in Dubuque. In just over a year, he made 38 donations totaling $1,375 to 13 of the telemarketer's charities.

Six times, he gave to two of the firm's clients on the same day.

The Iowa data details one company's operations in a state with roughly 3 million residents. But industry experts and the firm's employees who worked the phones say it is representative of how Associated Community Services and many other telemarketers do business across the nation.

Industry experts said such practices are used primarily by telemarketing companies that do cold-calling and take a percentage of the donations raised, rather than a flat fee, for their service.

The vast majority of the nation's 1.6 million nonprofits do not use telemarketing firms. Charities that hire these phone solicitors wind up with a fraction of what gets raised. Financial filings by clients represented by Associated Community Services show the firm and its related companies keep as much as 85 cents of every dollar donated. Once charities pay their own administrative costs – including rent and salaries – it often means pennies on the dollar make it to those in need.

Earlier this year, the *Times* and CIR examined thousands of charities that hire professional solicitors and identified the 50 worst based on how much they had paid these outside fundraisers over a decade. Nine of the 50 worst charities hired Associated Community Services to raise donations in Iowa and elsewhere nationwide.

The company collects donations in small amounts, meaning even repeat donors typically spend a few hundred dollars a year. But the money adds up. IRS records filed by charities show that Associated Community Services raised nearly $40 million for its clients in 2011.

Cole said the company, which employed 1,000 telemarketers in 2010, instructs employees not to collect money from people who seem confused or can't hear well.

But former employees said any such guidelines were widely ignored in the rush to generate profits.

Ex-workers said they felt pressured to keep pitching even if people were crying about their own losses or if they were elderly and confused.

Some people seemed starved for conversation, workers said. One former employee said he got a $50 pledge from a woman who kept him on the line for two hours. By the end, she had invited him to come visit and offered to include him in her will.

Another caller, Dwight David "Spyder" Turner, worked at the company for two years. He said he was fired in January for failing to push hard enough to make the "sale."

"You'd get people on the phone who sounded like they were dying or not all there," said Turner, a 66-year-old resident of Detroit. "With that job, you had to leave your conscience and compassion at the door."

Inside the phone room

John Abraham never met the people on the other end of the line.

But for four years, he made his living off their generosity, handling 300 to 400 calls a day as an employee of Associated Community Services.

Though Abraham, 43, left the company last year, he can still launch into a persuasive charity pitch at will.

“I won’t lie,” he said recently. “I was pretty good at it.”

Abraham learned to sell in the Detroit area, where Associated Community Services has two locations packed full of $10-an-hour telemarketers.

New hires rarely stay long in these high-pressure jobs. But for those who excel, the rewards can be great. In good years, the company raffled off TVs and cars at the office Christmas party, Abraham said.

In his job as a cold caller, Abraham was among those making the first pitch to prospective donors. If he persuaded someone to give, that person was marked as a “reload” — a designation that meant they would be hit up again for the same charity.

Reloads would also immediately go into the company’s dialing system so they could be solicited for other charity clients.

Sometimes, Abraham said, another pitch would come the very same day.

“They’d call you for breast cancer in the morning and veterans at night,” he said.

Although legal, the practice is frowned upon by many in the nonprofit world.

Instead of helping charity clients cultivate loyal benefactors, it drains generous donors by tapping them frequently for an array of causes, said Roger Craver, a 50-year veteran of the fundraising business.

“They’re ripping the charity and the donor off because they’re not permitting a relationship to grow between the two,” Craver said.

Because so many contributions are $10 to $20, it puts even more pressure on telemarketers to dial relentlessly to drive profits in a high-volume business.

To hit their quotas, the employees who spoke to the *Times* and CIR said they were trained to push hard under almost any circumstance.

Abraham said he once reached a man on his cellphone at a funeral.

“You get in trouble if you didn’t pitch them anyway,” he said. “You’re supposed to say, ‘I’m sorry for your loss, but our veterans are struggling every day.’”

Company documents submitted to Oregon regulators in 2010 show that telemarketers were trained to keep pushing even when they got a wrong number.

“I’m terribly sorry,” the instructions say. “We’re calling as many residents as possible in (their state) to let you know what we’re doing, so I’ll be brief (immediately go to opening).”

Turner, the former Associated Community Services telemarketer, said the firm was constantly pressing workers to get people to give by credit card, rather than check, so the sale could be processed immediately.

“If I had an old lady on the phone who was sick in bed, I wasn’t about to tell her I’ll hold on while she goes and gets her credit card,” Turner said. “But that’s what you were supposed to do.”

High pressure pays off

One Iowa donor, Sonja Molitor, is proof that the persistence of telemarketers pays off.

Molitor, 76, is a retired nurse. Until a few years ago, her husband ran the couple's 400-acre farm in northeast Iowa, growing corn, hay and oats.

Now all the animals – except for a black Lab named Molly and 20 barn cats – are gone. And Molitor, a petite brunette with a pixie cut, spends her days caring for her husband, who has dementia, and hauling buckets full of cat food to the red barn.

"I'm a huge lover of animals," she said as cats swarmed around her feet at feeding time. "But not in the house."

Though the couple, who had no children, live a comfortable retirement, Molitor tries to be mindful of where her money goes. But when a telemarketer calls while she's cooking or while she's helping her husband, Molitor often donates just to end the call.

"Sometimes it's easier to give them $10 and be able to get them off the line than listen to all the reasons you should give," she said.

That response put Molitor on the hot list at Associated Community Services.

Iowa records show that over 10 months, the firm's employees persuaded her to give 15 times.

Molitor said they called even more, but she sometimes hung up.

They called her twice on the same day in March 2011 and persuaded her to give to two different charities with similar-sounding names – Cancer Fund of America and The Breast Cancer Charities of America.

“The names are so confusing,” Molitor said. “And then they say, ‘If you donate this one time, we won’t bother you again for another year.’”

Four former phone solicitors told the *Times* and CIR they found ways to imply that the charity’s fundraising drive was an annual event.

Juantai Phillips, who worked at Associated Community Services for about three years, said he told people he would call “only once a campaign.”

What he did not say was that the campaign took place four times a year, Phillips said.

Fundraising experts say the distinction is important because donors are more likely to give if there is a sense of urgency or timeliness to a fundraising drive.

A script submitted by Associated Community Services to Oregon regulators in 2010 shows that the firm used this tactic to nudge prospective donors who said they needed to consult a spouse before giving.

“Well since it’s a nonprofit,” the caller was instructed to respond, “we only get one chance to call.”

Calling practices described by the firm’s employees are backed up in government records across the nation.

Since 2002, at least nine states have brought actions against Associated Community Services, accusing the company of a variety of infractions including misleading donors.

In 2010, the Iowa attorney general recorded company callers on an undercover phone line. Based on those calls, the state accused the company of fooling donors into thinking they were giving to a one-time charity campaign. On the same recorded calls, telemarketers and managers implied that 100 percent of donations would go to the charity – rather than the roughly 15 percent figure cited in documents.

Company officials signed a $35,000 settlement but admitted no guilt.

Cole, Associated Community Services' president, said employees are trained to give "accurate and appropriate answers" to donors' questions. "Individuals who fail to follow ACS policies are subject to discipline," he said.

Little for the needy

Earline Williams wouldn't be so upset if more of her money had gone to help those in need.

The 74-year-old Waterloo resident is a church-going Presbyterian with a sharp mind and a strong sense of giving.

Though her husband is a retired medical technologist with a comfortable income, Williams proudly says she draws from her own retirement funds when it comes to charitable contributions.

She tries to set aside 10 percent of her Social Security checks, earned from her time as a day care worker.

One year recently she was surprised when she realized her donations had ballooned to $1,800, in part because of her generosity to telemarketers like those at Associated Community Services.

The *Times* and CIR found that in one year she made 21 donations to nine different charities represented by the firm. The checks totaled $340.

"Coming from kind of a small income, that was a lot of money," said Williams, who tallies her donations at tax time using her check registers. "I suppose it's just thinking there's a need, and I need to try to help."

Williams, who has four children, tries to keep track of all the charities she supports. But she’s given to so many, she can’t even remember their names.

“There were so many different cancer groups, and I know I’ve done a couple of ‘wish charities,’” she said. “The names are so identical that sometimes I find I’ve given to a different charity than the one I thought I was giving to.” The *Times* and CIR found that Williams gave three times each to Cancer Fund of America and Children’s Cancer Fund of America, charities run by a man and his ex-wife in Tennessee.

Both of the groups ranked among America’s worst charities based on the amount they have paid professional solicitors.

The calls to Williams came so frequently that she could recognize the voices of certain telemarketers, even when they were calling for different charities. She said she felt guilty if she turned them down.

“They have such a terrible job,” she said.

Williams said she realized some of her donation would go toward paying those workers, but she did not think it would be 85 percent.

Of the $25 she gave to Foundation for American Veterans in January 2011, for instance, $3.75 made it to the charity, according to the charity’s IRS filing.

After years of giving, Judith Johnson, the legally blind woman, only recently realized how little of her money went to charity.

In one year, she donated almost $400 to Associated Community Services clients. Less than $80 remained after the telemarketer took its cut.

A few hundred dollars may not mean much to some people. But Johnson said in some months she was giving away a quarter of her income to the various charity telemarketing companies calling her.

About a year ago, Johnson had the phone company put a message on her answering machine. It warns callers that her line no longer accepts telemarketing calls and tells them to put her name on their "Do not call" list.

Since then she hasn't been bothered as much, and her finances have improved, allowing her to buy some winter clothes and treat herself to a Bible study guide.

But she's still stung when she thinks of how often she fell for telemarketers' pitches.

"I'm shocked at how double-tongued these people can be," Johnson said. "Sooner or later these fraudulent people are going to have to face their maker."

Tampa Bay Times computer-assisted reporter Connie Humburg and researcher Caryn Baird contributed to this report.

Placerville homeless camp dismantled

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

In the old Gold Rush town of Placerville, born from rough-hewn mining camps, a heralded social experiment packed up its tents last week.

After just more than 16 months, Hangtown Haven, a selfgoverning tent city of homeless residents grappling with mental illness, alcoholism and other life issues, is closing. Its demise will end a novel attempt by a small Sierra foothills community to address a major societal challenge.

After a packed chamber of local citizens engaged in emotional debate, the Placerville City Council said Hangtown Haven had to go when its city permit expired Nov. 15.

“What Hangtown Haven created was incredibly special,” said Placerville Mayor Wendy Thomas in offering its eulogy.

The camp, erected in July 2012 on a forested slope lent by a property owner just east of Placerville’s historic downtown, was kept clean and crime-free by homeless residents and community volunteers. It has hosted 25 to 40 people at any given time. And the city granted an extended reprieve in hopes the settlement could solve a persistent problem of homeless people taking over local parks or setting fires in the woods.

Read the whole story

Calif. parched — on pace for record dry year

By Jon Erdman, Weather Channel

The first 10 months of 2013 have been the driest such period on record in California, dating to 1895, according to the National Climatic Data Center.

Compare the rainfall so far in 2013 with the average-to-date totals through Nov. 14. Some locations are running over 20-inch precipitation deficits for the year, so far.

As a result, 84 percent of the state is categorized in severe drought, according to the Nov. 12 Drought Monitor analysis. Kern, Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, and parts of eight other California counties are considered in extreme drought, one drought category higher in the analysis.

This has taken a toll on the state's reservoir levels.

California dry years are not unusual. This is the Tahoe Keys pier in November 2009. Photo/LTN file

According to the California Department of Water Resources, several reservoirs are less than 40 percent capacity as of Nov. 13, including Lake Shasta (37 percent), Folsom Lake (27 percent), and Pine Flat Lake (17 percent).

Weather Underground weather historian, Christopher Burt, first raised concern about this worrisome drought in a late October blog post. "Now here it is November 14 and nothing has happened (no significant rain) since my blog," said Burt in an email to me about this event.

"It's amazing how we are running 50 percent below the previous calendar record for many spots," said Charles Bell of the National Weather Service in Monterey in an email to Burt on Nov. 14. "It's so bad that we thought the data at SFO (San Francisco) was not correct."

Any Relief?

A critical season looms for the nation’s most populous state.

California has pronounced wet and dry seasons. San Francisco, for example, picks up 85 percent of its average yearly rainfall in a five-month period from November through March. Snowmelt provides up to three-quarters of the West’s freshwater supply. In California, Sierra and to a lesser degree, Colorado River snowmelt, is crucial for reservoir replenishment.

In short, the Golden State needs a wet winter, with a combination of significant rain and mountain snow to replenish groundwater and reservoir levels. You could say California dreaming on such a winter’s day for water resource managers includes a parade of Pacific storms.

Are there any signs of the pattern turning wetter?

This weekend, a pronounced jet-stream disturbance will plunge into the Pacific Northwest and Rockies, but this is not a patten conducive for California rain or Sierra snow.

This week, a Pacific frontal system is expected to finally bring some rain to at least parts of Northern California.

What’s not certain at this time is whether all the significant rainfall will remain pinned to far northwest California, or if it will also spread farther south to thirsty parts of the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys, even to parts of the L.A. Basin, not to mention some welcomed snow to the Sierra.

What about the rest of the winter and spring?

Interestingly enough, of the 10 driest October-November periods on record in San Francisco, two years had excessively wet Decembers. Most recently, this occurred in December 1995.

December, January, and February are the three wettest months, on average, in the Bay Area.

That said, it remains to be seen if the Pacific storm track will set up from December through the spring to steer a parade of wet, Pacific storms to the thirsty Golden State.

Beekeepers to discuss their future in Tahoe

The California State Beekeepers Association is meeting in Stateline Nov. 19-21. Photo/John Miller

By Kathryn Reed

Survival of the honeybee is of much greater importance than whether or not there will be honey on store shelves.

"We are having a hard time keeping bees alive … mostly the honeybees," John Miller, president of the California State Beekeepers Association, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Domestic honeybees are the global champions of pollination and honey production. They may be the most beneficial insect on Earth."

But their habitat is shrinking as farmers plant nonnative crops that then take away areas for bees to forage.

Some of this is happening in North Dakota – one of three locations where Miller operates Miller Honey Farms. (The other locales are in Newcastle in Placer County and in Idaho.) North Dakota farmers are planting soybeans and corn on land that once was "summertime pasture for bees in California."

This is one of the topics that will be discussed Nov. 19-21 during the state organization's annual meeting at Harrah's Lake Tahoe.

"We are the gatekeepers of the food supply. Thirty percent of what people now eat in America is directly traceable to honeybees," Miller said.

The afternoon session on Nov. 19 will be about improving access for honeybees as well as the link between bees and almonds. Miller said the two are co-dependent.

"Without the bees, the almond industry will not continue to thrive and prosper, and without the almond industry, the beekeeper business model will fail," Miller said.

What people are putting on their crops is of importance too, because bees consume pesticides and herbicides. Even the average homeowner should avoid applying pesticides in the middle of the day when "pollinators are visiting."

Miller says the domestic-European honeybee is the most productive bee. All fruits with a pit benefit from them, as do pumpkins, kiwis, apples and berries, to name a few foods.

"As we become more wealthy as a planet, we improve our diet. As we improve our diet, we buy more of the foods that are dependent on bees for pollination," Miller said. Without bees, he said, people will be eating a whole lot more corn and rice.

What groups like his can do is advocate for conservation programs to be reinstated. Miller said for various reasons a lot of public land is not available to beekeepers.

“We have to be the voice for our living. There is no government program,” Miller said.

He pointed to the Placer Land Trust as an entity that has been good to beekeepers. The group planted a seed mix that is a benefit for native species and pollinators.

While bees on their own fly from area to area pollinating plants and creating nectar, it is the beekeepers like Miller and his brethren who bring the bees in large numbers to farmers.

They are portable as they happily live in a hive. Some people are hobbyists, while others make a living as beekeepers. It’s not unheard for a beekeeper to have 10,000 hives.

The beekeepers can then make honey, which comes from just about every state. Flavors are all over the board, and this is because the bees are foraging on so many different plants.

Some facts about honey from Miller:

• Honey is the only food consumed by humans that is produced by an insect.

• The average honeybee will make only one-twelfth of a teaspoon of honey in her lifetime.

• To make 1 pound of honey bees travel as far as 55,000 miles, getting nectar from more than 2 million flowers.

• A colony produces 60 to 100 pounds of honey a year.

Sierra Club drops challenge to Buffett buying NV Energy

By Cy Ryan, Las Vegas Sun

CARSON CITY — The Sierra Club is dropping its opposition to the $5.6 billion sale of NV Energy to billionaire Warren Buffett.

Buffett's MidAmerican Energy Holdings Co. reached the deal to acquire NV Energy, Nevada's primary electric utility, in May. NV Energy is the parent company of Nevada Power Co. in Las Vegas and Sierra Pacific Power Co. in Reno. It serves an estimated 2.4 million electric customers in Nevada.

A stipulation was filed Friday with the Nevada Public Utilities Commission in which the Sierra Club says that MidAmerican has agreed to continue plans to shut down the coal-fire Reid Gardner Power Plant, accused of being a major source of carbon dioxide air pollution.

Read the whole story

Feds develop program to better cope with drought

By John Flesher, AP

TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. — Federal agencies will provide better and more accessible information about matters such as long-term weather prospects and soil moisture levels under a program designed to help communities prepare for future droughts and respond more effectively when they happen, Obama administration officials said Thursday.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration will lead the initiative, which grew out of a series of regional forums held in response to the 2012 drought, the most severe and widespread in more than 70 years. It covered more than two-thirds of the continental U.S. and caused more than $30 billion in losses from crop failures, wildfires and other ripple effects.

Regan Beach in South Lake Tahoe in late October. Photo/LTN

“We were very aggressive in responding to the drought but all of it was after the fact,” Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said in an interview with The Associated Press. “We made money available for technical assistance after the fact. We provided disaster loan assistance and extended grazing aid after the fact. We purchased surplus product after the fact.”

With droughts likely to become more frequent and widespread as the climate warms, “we have to adjust to this new normal and we have to understand what it means to be proactive instead of just reacting,” he said.

Vilsack announced Friday the creation of the National Drought Resilience Partnership, which also will involve the Department of Interior, the Department of Energy, the Environmental

Protection Agency, the Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Emergency Management Administration. The goal is to help communities and individual farmers, ranchers and others whose livelihoods are particularly vulnerable during low-water periods to be ready and cope.

Read the whole story