

Environmentalists upset with Calif. fracking bill

By Marc Lifsher, Los Angeles Times

SACRAMENTO – Environmental and liberal activist groups are split over a pending pioneering bill that would regulate the controversial oil-extraction technique known as fracking.

Legislation by Sen. Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills, would, for the first time in the nation, require oil companies to disclose details of the chemicals, locations and procedures involved with hydraulic fracturing and related “well-stimulation” activities. The bill also would require that well sites be permitted and that the state conduct a scientific study of hydraulic fracturing, among other things.

In fracking, large quantities of water and sand as well as various chemicals are injected to free up oil and natural gas locked deep underground in shale formations. Another extraction method uses acid-solution injections to release the hydrocarbons.

Most environmental groups in testimony Wednesday before the Assembly Appropriations Committee backed Pavley. But the Sierra Club said it opposed the bill, arguing that it doesn’t give the public enough information to protect water and air from potential contamination.

Read the whole story

Tahoe basin socked in with smoke; fires rage

Appreciable smoke continues to linger in the Lake Tahoe Basin this morning.

The Rim Fire that is burning near and in Yosemite National Park is bringing the smoke to the South Shore and Carson Valley. Reports are that the smoke is worse in the Carson City-Dayton area than in the basin.

Counties throughout the region have issued health advisories because of the smoke. More information about what to do and the levels of risk may be found online.

Barton Memorial Hospital's emergency department reported a higher than normal number of patients in the past 24 hours.

"While we cannot provide an exact count, most patients seen have existing chronic pulmonary issues. Their problems have been escalated due to the smoke. Most symptoms have been shortness of breath," spokeswoman Monica Sciuto told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Barton Urgent care is open this weekend from 9am to 5pm at Stateline and the emergency department is open 24/7.

The Rim Fire has grown to more than 125,000 acres and is 5 percent contained. Thousands of homes are threatened and nine structures have been destroyed. Gov. Jerry Brown declared a state of emergency for San Francisco. The Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, which is about four miles from the fire, provides The City with 85 percent of its water. Two of the three hydroelectric power stations in the area have been turned off because of the fire.

The American Fire near Foresthill is at 22,040 acres and is

two-thirds contained. Full containment is expected Sept. 1.

According to fire officials, "The forest, timber industry, local agencies, and private landowners continue to contribute to collaborate to implement strategy and tactics that will minimize impacts on high value timber resources."

Four outbuildings have been destroyed and part of the Tahoe National Forest remains closed.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Healthy-sounding food labels being challenged

By Paul M. Barrett, Bloomberg News

Over the past 18 months, a group of plaintiffs' lawyers who got rich suing the tobacco industry have turned their litigious attention to what they hope will be the next big thing: challenges to healthy-sounding food labels they allege are misleading.

Hailing from across the U.S., the lawyers decided to sue in federal courts in Northern California, where the consumer-protection laws are expansive and the jury pool nutrition-conscious.

"Even the judges are calling this jurisdiction the Food Court," says Pierce Gore, the San Jose attorney serving as local coordinator for plaintiffs' firms in Mississippi, Texas, Tennessee, Illinois, and New York.

So far three dozen suits seeking class-action status are

pending in the Bay Area. The grocery list of targets includes Unilever's Ben & Jerry's ice cream, Chobani yogurt, Kraft's Trident gum, Hershey chocolates, Ocean Spray beverages, and Associated British Foods' Twinings teas.

Unlike suits over cigarettes, these food label cases don't allege that anyone has been physically injured or addicted; nor do they suggest that the products in question are dangerous or defective. Instead they challenge the hawking of granola bars, fruit juice, and green tea as being good for you.

Specifically, the suits say consumers are being tricked by such claims as "100 percent natural" and "no sugar added."

Read the whole story

Dangerous smoke cancels South Lake Tahoe air show; health officials say stay inside



This NASA image shows smoke from the Rim Fire blowing toward Lake Tahoe.

By Kathryn Reed

A fire hundreds of miles from Lake Tahoe has forced the cancellation of the 24th annual Lake in the Sky Air Show.

South Lake Tahoe City Manager Nancy Kerry said the FAA requires 1.5 to 3 miles of visibility and that as of Friday afternoon it is only at one mile.

And with the National Weather Service in Reno saying the smoky skies are expected to stay through the weekend, city officials did not want to take a chance and wait to call off of the show on Saturday morning – the day of the show.

The Rim Fire burning out of control near Yosemite National Park is bringing the eerie color skies to the basin. As of 3pm Aug. 23 that fire was at 105,620 acres and 2 percent containment. Fire crews say the growth potential is “extreme”.

Kerry said there was talk of having a static air show – as in planes just on the ground. However, she said with El Dorado County public health issuing a warning for people to stay indoors, the city could not justify having people stand around inhaling the smoke – including employees and the public.

“By Labor Day it will blow out. I wish we could just switch the air show to then,” Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*.

El Dorado County has said the air quality is “unhealthy”. The smoke is prevalent in El Dorado Hills and only gets stronger coming through the American River Canyon into the Lake Tahoe Basin.

Douglas County officials are also recommending people stay indoors. Air samples taken Friday in Gardnerville put the air quality in the upper end of the “moderate” level in the Carson Valley.

The National Weather Service in Reno has issued a dense smoke advisory for Alpine County and the southern part of the Lake Tahoe Basin through 7pm Aug. 24. Visibility in Markleeville and along parts of Highway 50 is expected to drop to one-quarter mile.

Ash has fallen in the Carson Valley and Alpine County.

Air quality is also an issue for the North Shore and Truckee and Carson areas. The American Fire that is burning near Foresthill is also hitting those regions.

“Afternoon-evening winds are forecast to increase somewhat each day this weekend, with winds gusts 20-30 mph Saturday and up to 35 mph Sunday. Any holdover fires from the lightning earlier this week could flare up with these gusts,” Jon Mittelstadt with the Weather Service said.

The good news about the wind is that should blow the smoke out of the basin.

In addition to the air show's being canceled, the South Lake Tahoe city pool and Bijou Golf Course are closed. The decision to open them will be on a day-to-day basis, but Kerry said to expect them to be closed through the weekend.

Other cancellations:

- Aug. 23 Minden Concert in the Park.
- The Aug. 24-25 Lake Tahoe Outrigger Challenge Race at Lakeview Commons.
- The Strawberry Music Festival at Camp Mather on Labor Day weekend.

Armed robber snares cash from Kings Beach bank



This man is a suspect in an Aug. 23 bank robbery in Kings Beach. Photo/Provided

The Bank of the West in Kings Beach was robbed Friday morning.

A man entered the bank about 10:30am Aug. 23 and showed a black handgun to a teller. The teller then gave the man an undisclosed amount of cash.

Placer County sheriff's detectives are working with South Lake Tahoe police officers to see if there are any similarities between this robbery and the one at El Dorado Savings on Aug. 21.

The suspect in the Kings Beach case is described as an older white male, wearing a baseball cap, sunglasses, black jeans and gray sweater. No vehicle was seen.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Calif. taxpayer-funded drug rehab under scrutiny

By Christina Jewett and Will Evans, Center for Investigative Journalism

SACRAMENTO -- California lawmakers ordered an audit this week to examine the extent of fraud in the state's taxpayer-funded drug rehabilitation program and to assess why measures weren't taken to stop it sooner.

The review was spurred by Rehab Racket, a yearlong investigation by the Center for Investigative Reporting and CNN that found widespread forgery and fabrication at alcohol and drug counseling clinics, as well as wide gaps in state and county oversight.

Sen. Ted Lieu, a Los Angeles County Democrat, and Assemblyman Adam Gray, chairman of the Joint Legislative Audit Committee and a Merced Democrat, jointly called for the review of the Medi-Cal-funded program for the poor.

"Ineffective oversight and fraud in the system siphons funds away from legitimate clinics, wastes taxpayer dollars and undercuts the public support for the program," Lieu told the Joint Legislative Audit Committee.

The audit is launching days after the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors unanimously approved its own independent review of the troubled program. That review is expected to probe what powers the county has to sanction and shut down errant clinics, since counties control the clinics' funding.

The state Department of Health Care Services and Department of Justice also are pursuing investigations into dozens of rehab clinics that have been suspended temporarily.

The statewide crackdown spurred by journalists' inquiries has resulted in 43 suspension letters mailed to 116 drug rehabilitation centers, which include headquarters offices and satellite offices, said Norman Williams, spokesman for the Department of Health Care Services.

The closures have hit a growing number of clinics featured in the CIR/CNN reports.

A week before the investigation's publication and airing, authorities quickly suspended operations at Able Family Support, a San Fernando Valley clinic operated by a man with an organized crime conviction that should have disqualified him from running a Medi-Cal clinic.

Another Los Angeles County clinic, Basen Inc., ceased operations this month, according to a former staff member as well as a man who answered Executive Director Bassey Enun-Abara's phone. Former client Vredette Hawkins described the

center as a chaotic place where clients were paid \$5 to show up. Enun-Abara denied the claim in a June interview.

Earlier this month, Los Angeles authorities also terminated their contract with Pride Health Services, a clinic that former employees said billed for “ghost clients” who didn’t show up for treatment.

The contract was cut based on the findings of a June Los Angeles County investigation described in the original CIR/CNN report. An anonymous complaint alleged, in part, that the firm billed for sham clients and services offered on Wednesdays, even though no services were offered that day.

Reporters confirmed in April that Pride did not see clients on Wednesdays during an interview with a receptionist captured on a hidden camera. When the clinic sent its billing to the county several weeks later, it billed for dozens of in-person therapy sessions that day.

County authorities did not find evidence to support the anonymous complaint, after talking to facility staff in May and June. However, days after the Rehab Racket series aired, the county moved on Aug. 2 to cut the contract based on other “serious deficiencies” identified in the June review. The termination notice cited the auditors’ discovery of blank medical forms signed by the clinic doctor.

Stephanie Jackson Parnell, a former employee who had filed another complaint about ghost billing at the clinic in 2009, said she was glad to see Medi-Cal funding cut off for Pride’s executive director, Godfrey Nwogene. “That’s what he gets,” she said.

Nwogene could not be reached at his clinic this week and has not responded to repeated requests for comment.

Following today’s committee approval, the Bureau of State Audits will review conduct at Pride and clinics like it at an

estimated cost of \$316,720.

State Auditor Elaine Howle said auditors will scrutinize clinics in Los Angeles and two other counties to determine the extent of fraudulent activity in the last five years.

“And if the corrective action has not been taken, why is that, what are the reasons that ... the state and or the county has for not taking action,” Howle said.

Top audits and investigations staff from the state’s Medi-Cal agency, the Department of Health Care Services, have been briefed on fraud in the rehab program for at least five years, the CIR/CNN investigation found.

Still, the state department did not begin a review of Drug Medi-Cal until mid-2012, when it gained full authority over the program, said Karen Johnson, the department’s chief deputy director. That also was when CIR began filing Public Records Act requests related to the program.

Johnson said authorities welcome the review and plan to cooperate.

“We consider this audit to be an opportunity for us to gain more information about the program’s administration and to hear recommendations for improving it,” she told lawmakers.

The call for the seven-month state review follows the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors’ unanimous request for a 30-day review of the rehabilitation program.

Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky asked for a county auditor-controller review of Drug Medi-Cal oversight, noting that responsibilities have been “unclear, overly complex, and have continually shifted.”

He also called on the county Department of Public Health to develop a way to rate the severity of problems found during routine clinic reviews and to report significant findings to

top management and supervisors.

“How can we do better?” Yaroslavsky said in an interview. “Because it has implications for not only this program, but the other programs we fund.”

Soon after the Los Angeles County review is expected to be completed, state lawmakers are scheduled to take up the matter again during a Sept. 26 Assembly Health Committee hearing.

Smoke to linger in Lake Tahoe



Smoke is providing for some spectacular sunsets in Lake Tahoe. Photo/Anjayla Monterastelli

Typical Tahoe blue skies have been replaced by gray, smoky skies that could linger as fires outside the basin rage on.

Health officials say people with heart or lung disease, older adults, and children should reduce prolonged or heavy exertion while the smoke is so thick.

The Rim Fire near Yosemite is what is inundating the South Shore. That fire is raging, with firefighters having lost

ground overnight. The fire has consumed more than 100,000 acres is 2 percent contained. It started Aug. 17. The cause is under investigation.

The American Fire near Foresthill has been bringing smoke to the North Shore and Truckee for days. That fire has consumed 20,232 acres and is 66 percent contained. Crews expect to have it fully contained Sept. 1.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Sinkhole on I-80 near Truckee slows travel

A sinkhole on Interstate 80 has closed the No. 1 lane in both directions near Donner Pass Road in Truckee.

The sinkhole is in the center median.

Motorists can expect delays Aug. 23 heading toward the Sacramento and Bay areas as well as the Lake Tahoe-Reno region. Caltrans and a contractor are at the scene to assess the situation and then perform necessary repairs. There is no estimated time to complete emergency repairs and reopen the closed lanes.

The sinkhole developed during a paving operation early Friday morning. The sinkhole is estimated to be approximately 3 feet in diameter and more than 8-feet deep.

The cause is unknown at this time.

Tahoe officials not worried about West Slope housing boom

By Kathryn Reed

No one knows what the economic impact to all of El Dorado County would be if 7,000 houses are built on the West Slope.

But more people would definitely further clog Highway 50, the main artery to the South Shore. Traffic is regularly choked getting out of South Lake Tahoe through Meyers on Sundays and bottlenecks again in Placerville with the traffic lights. The reverse happens on Fridays.

Tahoe tourism advocates for the past few years have tried to urge people to travel at non-peak times to help avoid the congestion and lessen the time it takes them to get to and from Tahoe. At the same they have urged hotels and restaurants and others to entice people to come earlier and stay later.

“Perhaps this presents a viable opportunity to contemplate public transit from outside the basin,” Carol Chaplin, executive director of Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The county could have helped the highway situation, but opted earlier to allocate Highway 50 funds to other areas.

Mike Applegarth with the County Administrator’s Office said the county has no tool to study the economic impacts of the housing because there are so many variables.

He told *Lake Tahoe News* that it is doubtful property taxes would cover all of the services impacted by the new development.

“But with homes comes commercial development. There is not a lot of development left on the West Slope. I think we have 1,500 acres of remaining commercial left,” Applegarth said. “Whether retail establishments generate a lot of sales taxes, it’s hard to say.”

Property tax revenue would definitely increase, especially with the new housing to be assessed at a higher rate than most of the older properties on the market.

But there is also the toll that can be taken on roads, schools, fire districts, sheriff’s office, and other infrastructure and county departments.

The county’s 2014 General Plan allows for 21,000 more houses. The General Plan for the most part covers areas outside of the Lake Tahoe Basin. The basin is covered by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Regional Plan and community or area plans for specific sections.

“These projects sound like they will create quite a bit of a fight between growth, smart-growth and rural advocates, putting pressure on the El Dorado County supervisors to balance these competing interests. The arguments for and against are the same arguments that have been waged in most locations throughout the west for many years,” Nancy Kerry, South Lake Tahoe city manager, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

She doesn’t see the housing alone negatively impacting the South Shore, but added that if jobs that pay well are part of the equation, then an impact would likely be inevitable.

El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago, who represents Tahoe, was not available for comment.

“From a tourism standpoint, it won’t drive much in the way of room nights as the West Slope would be a day trip market for the most part,” Chaplin said. “With that said, it could benefit our recreation providers and generate sales tax

through purchase of activities, retail and restaurant food-beverage.”

While the Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce is supposed to represent a different constituency than LTVA, chamber CEO B Gorman said, “I think (Chaplin) covered all that I would have said.”

Then there is also the matter of 10,000 houses that are slated to go in next door in Folsom – which is in Sacramento County.

Obama trying to lower the cost of college

By Tamar Lewin, New York Times

President Obama announced a set of ambitious proposals on Thursday aimed at making colleges more accountable and affordable by rating them and ultimately linking those ratings to financial aid.

A draft of the proposal, obtained by the New York Times and likely to cause some consternation among colleges, shows a plan to rate colleges before the 2015 school year based on measures like tuition, graduation rates, debt and earnings of graduates, and the percentage of lower-income students who attend. The ratings would compare colleges against their peer institutions. If the plan can win Congressional approval, the idea is to base federal financial aid to students attending the colleges partly on those rankings.

“All the things we’re measuring are important for students choosing a college,” a senior administration official said.

“It’s important to us that colleges offer good value for their tuition dollars, and that higher education offer families a degree of security so students aren’t left with debt they can’t pay back.”

Obama hopes that starting in 2018, the ratings would be tied to financial aid, so that students at highly rated colleges might get larger federal grants and more affordable loans. But that would require new legislation.

Read the whole story