National Park Service's befuddled funding

By Phil Taylor, High Country News

As the Park Service celebrates its 100th anniversary, lack of funding threatens its ability to fulfill its basic mandate to preserve America's iconic scenic, historic and recreational sites for the public's enjoyment.

Congress has been tightening the agency's purse strings. Annual appropriations, which make up about 88 percent of its roughly $3 billion budget, declined 8 percent between 2005 and 2014 after adjusting for inflation, according to a December report from the Government Accountability Office.

As a result, park superintendents are being forced to do more with less – particularly when it comes to staff. "What options do superintendents have?" says Denis Galvin, a Park Service retiree who served as deputy director under presidents Reagan, Clinton and George W. Bush. "You've got to pay the electric bill. You've got to pay your suppliers of materials. The only thing a park superintendent can really do is not hire people."

Read the whole story

Climate change threatens American pika in Nev.

By Brady McCombs, AP

Populations of a rabbit-like animal known as the American pika

are vanishing in many mountainous areas of the West as climate change alters its habitat, according to findings released Thursday by the U.S. Geological Survey.

The range for the mountain-dwelling herbivore is decreasing in southern Utah, northeastern California and in the Great Basin that covers most of Nevada and parts of Utah, Oregon, Idaho and California, the federal agency concluded after studying the cuddly looking critter from 2012-15.

This study's conclusion marks a more authoritative statement about the role of global warming on the animal compared to research released in 2003 that found climate change was at least partly contributing to the animal's decline.

"The longer we go along, the evidence continues to suggest that climate is the single strongest factor," said Erik Beever, a research ecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey and lead author.



A study shows the American pika is vanishing from areas of the Western United States. Photo/Shana S. Weber/USGS

The pika's habitat on mountain slopes, known as talus, are hotter and drier in the summer and more harsh in the winter with less snowpack to serve as an insulator, Beever said.

The study bolsters the case for wildlife advocacy groups pushing for years to have the animal added to the endangered species list amid concerns about global warming.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service rejected a request in 2010, saying not all populations were declining. A new request was made this April by a high school student in New York state.

A preliminary decision on that request is due out in early September, but the agency's staff won't take into account the new study because they are bound to only take into account information submitted with the petition, said Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman Serena Baker.

Noah Greenwald, the Center for Biological Diversity's endangered species director, said the new research confirms that climate change is putting the animal at real risk. He said it should help with future petitions to have the animal declared endangered – something he says is necessary to ensure future generations are treated to seeing the critters during mountain hikes.

"It's gotta be one of the cutest animals in North America. It's like a cross between a bunny rabbit and prairie dog," Greenwald said. "Part of what makes our world interesting is the diversity of animals and plants that you can see when you go to different species."

President Obama mentioned the plight of the pika this summer when he spoke at Yosemite National Park about the damage climate change is inflicting on the nation's national parks. He said the pika was being forced further upslope at Yosemite to escape the heat.

The study didn't quantify how many total American pika still exist, but honed in on several areas where the small animal has historically roamed eating grass, weeds and wildflowers.

The animal is thriving in a few places, such as the Columbia

River Gorge in Oregon and Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming, but overall is suffering, Beever said.

At Utah's Zion National Park, they're gone all together despite being seen as recently as 2011. In nearby Cedar Breaks National Monument, they're no longer in three-fourths of their historical habitat, Beever said.

Pikas were not found in 11 of 29 sites where it once lived in northeastern California.

In the Great Basin, which stretches from Utah's Wasatch Mountains in the east to the Sierra Nevada and Cascade Mountains in the west, the population is down about 44 percent compared to historical records.

"It's not that they've just moved, they are gone all together," Beever said.

Mammoth, Forest Service say let's make a deal

By Michael Doyle, McClatchy News Service

A Sierra Nevada land swap that would add 1,317 acres to three national forests in exchange for about 30 acres serving the prominent Mammoth Mountain ski resort is nearer completion.

After maneuvering that dates at least to 2011, the Forest Service on Friday pushed ahead with the proposal involving the Stanislaus, Plumas and Inyo national forests. Supporters call it a win-win proposition.

The swap must still survive scrutiny, starting with a 45-day

public comment period and a hearing Sept. 8 in Mammoth Lakes. Already, though some residents of nearby June Lake have raised concerns, the proposal has cleared political hurdles that exemplify how Washington works.

To navigate a deeply partisan Congress, the land-swap proponents got companion bills in the House of Representatives and the Senate introduced by the local congressman, Republican Rep. Paul Cook of Apple Valley, as well as by California Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein.

Read the whole story

PCT work to impact trail users

Sections of the Pacific Crest Trail near Lake Tahoe will be reconstructed.

Crew members from the American Conservation Experience, Truckee Trail Foundation, REI and Tahoe National Forest will work north of Old Highway 40 past the rock climbing areas and the Summit Lake Trail, beginning at the junction with the PCT and proceeding north. These areas are currently below National Forest Service trail standards because of overuse and detrimental environmental conditions and require intensive maintenance.

While minor delays may impact recreationalists as they hike the trail Monday through Friday between the hours of 8:30am-4:30pm from now until Sept. 9, major delays are

expected on Sept. 13 on these segments. Weekend use of the trails should not be affected, but hikers are cautioned to move through the affected areas taking into consideration the current status of the construction.

BLM plays important role at Lake Tahoe

By Chris Rose

The progress made on Lake Tahoe's restoration over the last 20 years required significant capital investment from the public and private sectors. While the federal Bureau of Land Management does not manage any lands in the Tahoe basin, the agency has played an instrumental role in funding and coordinating the federal share of the Lake Tahoe environmental improvement program.

As the largest federal manager of public lands in the United States, BLM's role in Tahoe has not been widely known. BLM became involved in the Lake Tahoe Basin in 1997 through an executive order former President Bill Clinton signed to create the Lake Tahoe Federal Interagency Partnership. The partnership includes agencies from the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Defense, Interior, and Transportation, as well as the Environmental Protection Agency.

$400 million in projects

Agencies in the partnership work to implement high-priority projects in the Lake Tahoe EIP, and BLM has used funding from the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act (SNPLMA) to help to restore Lake Tahoe through stewardship, service, and

science. Since 2002, BLM has provided approximately $400 million in SNPLMA funding for more than 400 projects in the Tahoe basin to stop water clarity-harming soil erosion and reduce hazardous fuels in the wildland urban interface where Tahoe’s forests and communities meet.

An amendment to SNPLMA in 2003 facilitated a predictable funding stream to fulfill the federal share of the EIP. This major investment has required close coordination to plan, execute, and account for SNPLMA funding.

BLM has also used portions of that SNPLMA funding to acquire environmentally-sensitive lands identified by the Santini-Burton Act. To date, $115 million has been set-aside for Santini-Burton Act acquisitions at Tahoe. Of that amount, the U.S. Forest Service has spent $67 million to acquire 2,576 acres. Another 21 acres are in the process of being acquired for $2.9 million, leaving more than $44 million available for future land acquisitions. Protecting sensitive lands from development has a direct tie to improving the lake’s famed water clarity.



Thinning the forests around Lake Tahoe has helped return the woodlands to natural conditions while reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfire. Photo/Mike Vollmer

Providing the oversight

BLM provides the framework, rules, and program oversight for federal agencies in the Tahoe basin, and its focus on transparency, accountability, and demonstrated results is critical to ensure that Environmental Improvement Program projects comply with applicable laws and regulations.

A new project category for hazardous fuels reduction and wildfire prevention was created through the White Pine County Conservation, Recreation, and Development Act amendment to

SNPLMA in 2008. This project category helps pay for the creation and implementation of multi-jurisdictional hazardous fuels reduction plans and wildfire prevention in the Tahoe basin, as well as in the Carson Range and the Spring Mountains in Nevada.

Thousands of acres treated

BLM organizes the nomination, implementation, and compliance of hazardous fuels reduction projects for all 18 entities in the Tahoe basin eligible for this hazardous fuels funding. Of the 76 hazardous fuels reduction projects SNPLMA has funded to date, 43 projects have been for the Tahoe Basin, removing hazardous fuels from thousands of acres of forests around Lake Tahoe communities.

“The stability and sustainability of funding from SNPLMA has allowed, and will continue to allow, federal, regional, local, and private entities to create and implement long-term hazardous fuels reduction and wildfire prevention plans within the basin,” BLM Nevada Director John Ruhs said.

BLM will continue to be a major partner in reducing wildfire risk and improving forest health at Tahoe, and will consider approving more hazardous fuels reduction projects in future rounds of SNPLMA funding.

This summer, BLM issued a preliminary recommendation for funding another round of hazardous fuels reduction projects through SNPLMA. BLM recommends funding another 37 projects totaling almost $105 million, with five of those projects totaling almost $25.7 million in the Tahoe basin.

“Federal funds through BLM are critical to reducing the risk of catastrophic wildfire at Lake Tahoe,” said Forest Schafer, of the North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District and incident commander for the Tahoe Fire and Fuels Team. “We are grateful for the longstanding partnership.”

Chris Rose is a public affairs specialist with the Bureau of Land Management. This article first appeared in ***Tahoe In Depth****.*

Technology helps in fight against AIS

Smartphones became Lake Tahoe's first line of defense against the introduction of new aquatic invasive species this summer.

Members of the Lake Tahoe Aquatic Invasive Species Program received real-time updates from other land managers about vessels traveling to Lake Tahoe from waters with a high risk of containing invasive species. The data-sharing app used by partner agencies acts as an early warning system for Tahoe's watercraft inspectors.

Since 2009, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency has enforced mandatory watercraft inspections at Lake Tahoe, which has prevented the introduction of new aquatic invasive species.

So far this year, inspectors in the Lake Tahoe region have conducted more than 7,300 inspections and decontaminated more than 3,500 vessels.

In 2016 thus far, Lake Tahoe watercraft inspectors have prevented four boats containing quagga mussels from launching. The most recent discovery took place this month at the boat inspection station in Meyers.

Quagga mussels have caused significant environmental damage in U.S. waterways, including the Great Lakes and Lake Mead.

In addition, 20 boats have been found with other invasive

species, including New Zealand mudsnails, during the inspection process at Lake Tahoe.

CalFire, USFS team up to thin forest

Eldorado National Forest and CalFire Amador-Eldorado Unit have signed an agreement which transfers $908,000 to the state agency to reduce hazardous fuels federal land.

This is the first supplemental project agreement under the Good Neighbor Master Agreement between the California Natural Resources Agency and the U.S. Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region which was finalized in January.

The fuel reduction includes work on two phases of Fire Adapted 50 which is a key component of the South Fork American River Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy. The funding will provide 1,000 crew days to treat 500 acres; a tracked chipper; an equipment trailer; and the environmental analysis required for additional fuel break construction.

The work includes 100 acres on the Camino Pollock Pines Fuel Break; and 400 acres on the Highway 50 Fuels Reduction Project. These projects are located in the wildland urban interface within a high value landscape along the Highway 50 corridor where there have been five major wildfires in the last 40 years.

Star Guide: Cluster proves to be worthy objects

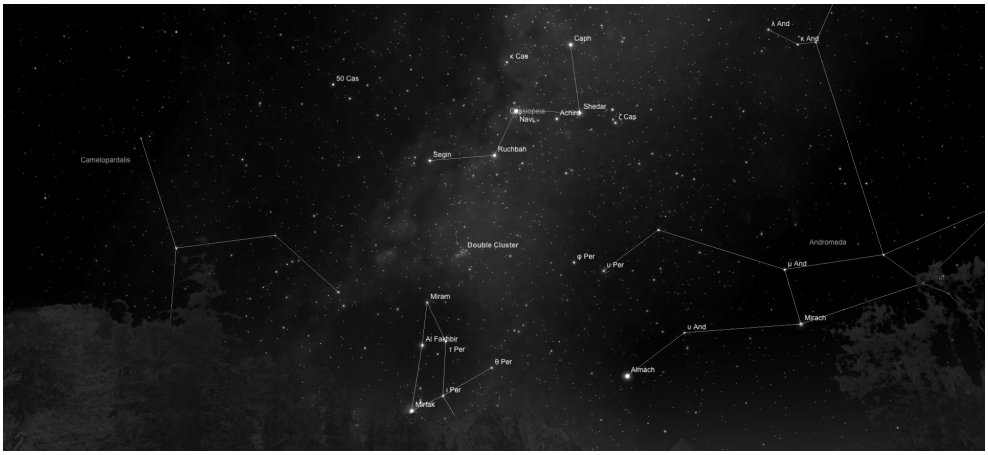
By Tony Berendsen

Many years ago while visiting the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco I went on a docent tour of modern abstract paintings. There was one giant wall sized painting dedicated to a single room. It was blue, that's all, just a blue wall. I had no idea of how to appreciate a blue wall. The docent brought to our attention that when walking into the room the blue wall changed our spatial interpretation of the room size: such is art.

Many years ago a friend showed me the Double Cluster in Perseus through his telescope. I saw two clusters, side by side, that's all. I had no idea of how to appreciate what I was seeing. Then he explained to me that both clusters were very distant (over 7,000 light years) and were very young with lots of young brilliant blue white stars: such is astronomy.

Since then, the Double Cluster has become one of my favorite objects to view. It can be seen with the naked eye as a nebulous star, in binoculars as two distinct star clusters, and through a telescope as a stellar jewelry box filled with brilliant bluish white stars.

Both star clusters are designated as NGC (New General Catalog) objects and are only a few hundred light years apart. NGC 869 is composed of more than 200 stars with an estimated average age of 5.6 million years. NGE 884 has 175 stars and younger at an average age of 3.2 million years old. Due to there close proximity to each other they may have formed from the same molecular gas cloud.



Double Cluster is worth another look. Photo/Simulation Curriculum

Both clusters have been measured as blue shifted and heading toward our area of space at 49,000 mph. No worries though since they are very distant. One of the amazing things about these clusters is their brightness making them the most distant naked eye star clusters visible to the naked eye.

In comparison with the Pleiades, which is a mere 150 light years distant, if the double cluster were that close, the stars would be as bright as Vega and cover almost a quarter of the night sky.

To find the double cluster, break out your favorite astronomy app and point to the northeast to find Cassiopeia in the early evening. Two of the stars making the “W” shape of the constellation (Navi and Ruchbah) create a line to follow toward the horizon to the constellation Perseus. Look for a semi bright nebulous star on that line of site. Grab your binoculars, or telescope with a low power eyepiece, and the clusters will appear.

Gazing at the Double Cluster I’m always amazed at the size and scale of the cosmos they represent. Looking across to the next arm of our galaxy, seeing these young bright stars in the distance: such is discovery.

Tony Berendsen runs Tahoe Star Tours. He may be reached at

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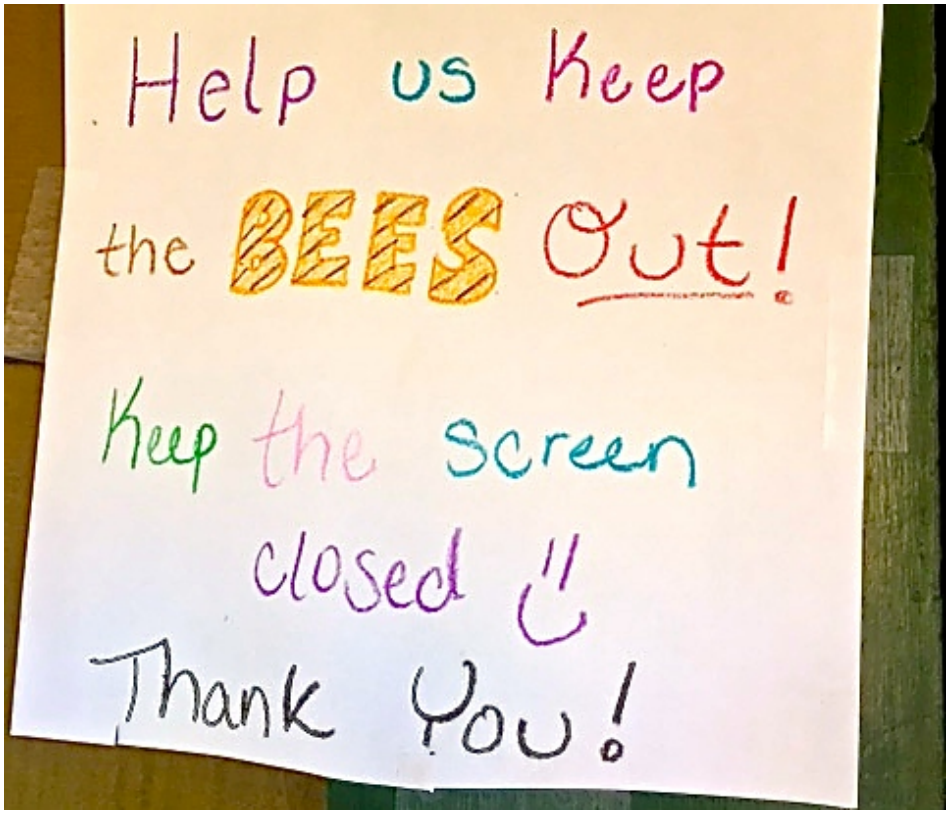
South Tahoe seeks to renew bike friendly status

South Lake Tahoe needs people to take a survey in order to retain its Bicycle Friendly Community designation.

During this certification process the League of American Bicyclists reviews all bicycle related information submitted to them, which includes how many miles of bike paths/lanes are in South Lake Tahoe, what type of bike infrastructure improvements have been completed, how the city encourages the public to cycle, law enforcement related to cycling, educational outreach for cycling, and basic demographics of the community.

Part of the process is getting feedback from community members via an **online survey**. The survey takes a few minutes to complete and the results will be shared with the community. The survey is open now through Sept. 15 at midnight.

Aggressive yellow jackets a nuisance in Tahoe



The ice cream shop at Camp Richardson is trying to keep the bees out. Photo/Susan Wood

By KPIX-TV

It’s been a beautiful summer at Lake Tahoe, but the buzz is that vacationers aren’t the only ones enjoying the water.

Yellow jackets are all over the place.

They’re aggressive, fast and much more active than they were last year.

“Really, it’s a bad year, I mean everyone is closing their patio dining,” said Angella Falco with Placer County Vector Control.

Read the whole story