Peak near Yosemite likely to be named for Olympic skier

By Michael Doyle, McClatchy Newspapers

WASHINGTON – Congress stretched the rules a bit by naming a Yosemite National Park-area mountain after the late Olympic star and longtime Mono County Supervisor Andrea Lawrence. And most everyone is cool with that.

Within days, President Obama is expected to sign the legislation designating a 12,240-foot peak near Yosemite and the Inyo National Forest as "Mount Andrea Lawrence." The legislation that passed the House of Representatives and the Senate also happens to shed light on how politics and bureaucracy can sometimes compete in the naming of the American landscape.

"Conflict in naming geographic features (was), in fact, a serious detriment to the orderly process of exploring and settling this country," the U.S. Board on Geographic Names noted in one extensive report.

Established in 1890, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names usually handles the official naming of natural features such as lakes, peaks and valleys. Sometimes, as with Congress designating Mount Andrea Lawrence, the board is bypassed.

Sometimes, the board's own work gets surprisingly provocative.

Currently, for instance, the board is considering a proposal to designate two unnamed Arizona peaks as "Bosom Peaks." The proponent explained to officials that "to a motorist driving Highway 64, they resemble exactly what the name proposes."

In Northern California's Placer County, an African American rancher wants to rename "Coon Creek" as "Hidden Falls Creek"

to shed racist connotations.

Florida residents are haggling over whether a barrier island should be called San Pablo Island or the more patriotically commemorative “Veterans Island.”

In November, board meeting minutes show, officials discussed proposals to strip the name “squaw,” which Native Americans consider derogatory, from a number of Oregon natural features. Unanimously, board members also rejected a proposal to rename Mill Branch in North Carolina’s Ashe County as “Hippie Creek.”

Besides considering name changes, the board sets policies that lawmakers can sidestep. One board policy is that a person must be deceased for at least five years before a commemorative naming proposal will be considered. Another policy discourages naming features in designated wilderness areas unless an “overriding need” can be demonstrated.

Congress, though, can also take matters into its own hands; particularly, as with the Mount Andrea Lawrence proposal renaming, when the honoree is locally renowned.

“Her passion and achievements were both larger than life, which is why I cannot think of a more fitting tribute than to name this majestic peak in her honor,” declared Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif.

An alpine ski racer in the 1948, 1952 and 1956 Winter Olympics, Lawrence earned two gold medals and eventual election to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame before moving to Mono County on the east side of the Sierra Nevada. She was active in environmental protection efforts and served 16 years on the county’s Board of Supervisors, establishing along the way the Friends of Mammoth and the Andrea Lawrence Institute for Mountains and Rivers.

Lawrence died March 31, 2009, at age 76.

By the usual standards of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, advocates would wait until March 2014 before proposing the name. Instead, in April 2010, Boxer joined with Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Santa Clarita, in introducing the Andrea Lawrence bill.

Wendy Sugimura, former mayor of Mammoth Lakes, said last week that "while not everyone agreed with Andrea, particularly on a political level," the naming of a mountain peak after her was appropriate because "she was responsible for so much preservation of the Mono County heritage."

Congress formally sent the bill to the White House on Monday, starting a 10-day clock for Obama to sign it.

Snowmaking guarantees there will be a ski season in Tahoe

By Hugo Martin, Los Angeles Times

Mother Nature has been a fickle manager of snowfall lately, sending an avalanche of powder to ski resorts across the country two years ago, followed by the least amount of snowfall in decades last winter.

Even with the major snows of recent weeks in the Sierra, it's too early to tell if this season will be a snowy success or another dry disappointment.

But ski resort managers are losing less sleep over erratic weather conditions after making a flurry of investments in the past few years in ultra-efficient, computerized snow-making

equipment.

Once powered by diesel air compressors and monitored by workers on snowmobiles, today's snow-making systems rely on computers, fiber-optic cables and low-energy fans that can be controlled by smartphone or programmed to automatically make snow when conditions are prime.

The good news for powder hounds is that the frozen spray generated by modern snow-making equipment is so close to real snow that even veteran skiers can't tell the difference.

"If I'm going down a run, I can't tell you if I just skied on natural or man-made snow," said Bruce Lee, a Redondo Beach resident who has been skiing for 30 years in Vermont, Pennsylvania, Utah, Colorado and California. "I'll bet no one can tell the difference."

Investments in snowmaking have been especially crucial in California, where snowfall has always been particularly unreliable. The state is home to 29 resorts that generate an estimated $1.3 billion in spending a year.

Last year's ultra-dry season only reinforced the value of artificial snow-making systems. The 2011-12 season marked the lowest national average snowfall in 20 years, forcing half of the nation's resorts to either open late or close early.

The National Resources Defense Council estimates that ski resorts lost $1 billion in revenue because of meager snowfall in the past decade.

Resort operators that had already invested heavily in snowmaking equipment said man-made snow helped them avoid a complete bust.

"For us, the reaction to last year was, 'Thank God we've done what we did in the past,'" said Pete Sonntag, general manager at Heavenly Mountain Resort, where 155 snow-making machines

can cover 65 percent of the resort’s skiable terrain.

Heavenly’s snow-making system — the largest on the West Coast — can be controlled from a desktop computer at a pump house on the mountain or a smartphone carried by Barrett Burghard, the resort’s senior manager for snow surfaces.

“I’m not going to lie and say we can make snow as good as Mother Nature,” Burghard said as he glanced at a computer screen to check the water levels in the resort’s storage tanks. “But it’s close.”

The best man-made snow, he said, is light and can be pressed into a snowball without oozing water.

He has another, very unscientific method for testing his machine-spewed snow: He tosses it against his arm to see how it bounces off his sleeve. “There’s an art to making snow,” Burghard said.

In the past, snowmaking was a labor-intensive task that involved teams of workers taking temperature and humidity readings throughout the night.

If the conditions were right for snowmaking, workers would ride snowmobiles up the mountains to switch on snow guns, which were often powered by diesel air compressors and connected to high-pressure air and water hoses bordering ski runs.

But temperatures at different spots on a mountain can vary by several degrees, making it difficult for resort operators to gauge when and where to activate the snow guns.

Modern snowmaking guns use less energy than older systems, relying on a combination of portable compressors and energy-efficient fans.

They also have built-in computers that take on-site temperature and humidity readings, which are sent to a central

computer via radio waves or fiber optics. That enables them to be controlled remotely, allowing resort operators to begin making snow as soon as conditions are right. They can also program the guns to switch on automatically even when no one is monitoring the system.

These high-tech snow guns are expensive, up to $50,000 each. But the payoff is better snow.

“The snow is more consistent with the new machines,” said Jim Larmore, director of mountain operations at Northstar, which added nearly 100 snow guns last summer. “The product is so much better. When you ski on it, the snow is soft, and when you push your edge into it, it carves.”

In the mountains above Lake Tahoe, the owners of Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows spent $4 million on snow-making equipment last summer. The two resorts can now cover almost 30 percent of their skiable terrain with man-made snow.

“Every chance we have to make snow, we are making it,” said Andy Wirth, president and chief executive at Squaw Valley. “It’s pedal down.”

In the San Bernardino Mountains, the managers of the Snow Summit and Bear Mountain resorts have invested about $12 million in new snow-making equipment over the last eight years, enough to coat every run on both resorts with a layer of snow.

“We are ahead of many mountains in the West because we have 100 percent of our runs covered,” said Chris Riddle, a spokesman for the resorts.

Even in Colorado, where natural snow is more abundant, some resort owners have invested in new snow-making equipment as a hedge against future dry seasons. Over the last three years, for example, the Breckenridge Ski Resort in Colorado added more than 150 energy-efficient snow guns.

Some ski resorts that are blessed with heavy annual snowfall have not made big investments in snow-making equipment.

“We look to Mother Nature to provide for us,” said Stephen Hemphill, spokesman for Sierra-at-Tahoe. The 2,000-acre resort gets an average of 480 inches of natural snow a year.

Whether it’s man-made or natural snow, skiers who endured last year’s dry snow season say they are grateful to have anything that lets them fly down the mountain.

“The more snow the better,” said Jane Ferry, membership director of the Santa Barbara Ski and Sports Club and a skier who has visited mountains throughout the West. “I don’t care where it comes from.”

National Winter Trails Day explores Mt. Rose area

The Tahoe Rim Trail Association’s sixth annual National Winter Trails Day extravaganza is Jan. 12 from 10am-3pm.

Participants may register for a snowshoe hike, learn about snow core sampling, receive helpful winter safety information, demo gear, craft their own snow shelter and be a potential raffle prize winner.

The festivities will be in Tahoe Meadows just off Mount Rose Highway.

To participate, contact Hayley at (775) 298.0238 or programs@tahoerimtrail.org.

Free guided snowshoe hikes from Tahoe Meadows to the Tahoe

Meadows Overlook and surrounding areas will take place throughout the day. Each hike has its own theme and guest interpreter.

Destructive mussel found in SoCal lake

By Jim Holt, Santa Clarita Valley Signal

Fresh-water mussels that can cause millions of dollars in waterway and pipeline damage have invaded Lake Piru, putting park officials at nearby Castaic Lake on heightened alert, state and county officials said Monday.

The discovery marks the first time the destructive mollusks, called quagga or zebra mussels, have been found in a Southern California water body that does not receive water from the Colorado River.

Lake Piru Recreation Area staff reported the discovery of potential quagga mussels to Fish and Wildlife officials on Dec. 18.

Read the whole story

Rescued bobcat being taught to toughen up to survive the wild

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

Since last summer, when she emerged as an orphaned kitten who affectionately introduced herself to crews battling a major wildfire in Plumas County, Chips the bobcat has been diagnosed with an attitude problem.

She’s too nice for a bobcat.

And so, in her second of two rehabilitation assignments, volunteers for a Placerville animal rescue group are working to “wild her up” for her return to nature.

She is getting some tough love in a private pen from retired postal worker Jill Tripoli, 56, a longtime volunteer wildlife trainer for Sierra Wildlife Rescue. She’s been introduced to some male rescue mates, Tuffy and Sierra, who have no trouble hissing at humans and revealing their fangs and claws in anger.

“If you have a friendly bobcat in the wild, that’s not going to work,” said Tripoli, who will give Chips a squirt from a water bottle if she even thinks of buddying up to a human.

But Chips is here, successfully on the mend, for doing just that.

The orphaned bobcat, then a kitten barely 3 or 4 weeks old, emerged from smoldering brush Aug. 25 during the monthlong 75,000-acre Chips Fire in the Plumas National Forest. Fire crews found her lethargic, wandering in circles near a road eight miles from the town of Chester. She warmed to them.

Chips followed the firefighters, in particular a Mad River Ranger District hand crew member, Charles “Tad” Hair.

Every time Hair and the crew would stop, she nuzzled up to his boot, snuggling his chaps. He picked her up. She had second-degree burns on her paws. Her eyes were full of soot and pus.

“Tad just took pity on her,” said Nan Powers, another volunteer for Sierra Wildlife Rescue, a Placerville group that helps orphaned or injured animals, from squirrels to coyotes, to recover and return to the wild. “He gathered her up and flushed her eyes out.

“Some girls have all the luck.”

John Heil, a Forest Service spokesman, said the bobcat survived “in an area where the fire burned pretty intensely.

“How it survived with the fire passing through is miraculous,” he said.

Firefighters conducted a search to see if there was a bobcat mother to be found. After realizing the cub was long abandoned, they took Chips to the rescue shelter of Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care in South Lake Tahoe.

A veterinarian cleaned away burned tissue and treated and wrapped her paws. She got a soft bed and a recovery diet of pulverized mice.

Chips healed up nicely. And on Nov. 1 she was brought to an enclosed pen in Placerville.

She was introduced to Tuffy, a snarly bobcat who got his fractured elbow repaired by a local vet after getting hit by a car in El Dorado County, and to Sierra, who was left by his mother near the Sierra Army Depot, southeast of Susanville, and wasn’t about to warm to any human.

So now there’s no more cuddling for Chips, no more soft bed.

She’s having to chase down her own live mice, and occasionally a rabbit, with Tuffy and Sierra. Only on special days does she get some ready-made roadkill squirrel.

And now she’s getting an attitude, hiding under an enclosure when humans approach. But generally, unlike her pen mates, she’ll still stick her head out to take a peek.

The three bobcats are due to be released into the wild next spring. Meanwhile, Sierra Wildlife Rescue is seeking donations to pay for the 3 pounds of food a day the animals consume.

People seeking information or interested in contributing to the bobcats may call Sierra Wildlife at (530) 621.4661.

Human factors of avalanche safety topic of forum

Tahoe Backcountry Women’s mission is to come together to share stories, experiences, and education about backcountry skiing and boarding. Women of all ages and abilities are welcome.

On Jan. 9 from 6:30-8:30pm is a class called Avalanche Safety – The Human Factors.

It will be at Alpenglow Sports in Tahoe City.

Megan Michelson will share her firsthand experiences from last year’s Steven’s Pass avalanche. Michelson wrote about this tragedy in Outside magazine.

After sharing her experiences on Steven’s Pass, Michelson will

lead a discussion about the human factors of avalanche safety, an ever-growing field of study. What is human nature when traveling in groups? How does group mentality contribute to, or hinder safety? Does gender play a role?

For more info, email whitney@alpenglowsports.com or call (530) 583.6917.

Free ranger-led snowshoe at Spooner Lake

The Nevada Division of State Parks is participating in the First Day Hike.

This free event at Spooner Lake on Jan. 1 from 10am-noon is sponsored by the National Association of State Park Directors. Park entrance fees are waived for participants in the snowshoe.

Children are welcome, but dogs are not permitted. Dress warm, bring a snack and water. This will be most likely a snowshoe hike, given the time of year, but may be a hike if there is no snow.

Spooner Lake one-half mile north on Highway 28 from the intersection of highways 28 and 50.

For more info, contact Bill Champion at (775) 831.0494, ext. 224, or rangerbillattahoe@gmail.com.

Vail Resorts adds air bags to patrollers' bucket of tools

By Colin Bane, ESPN.com

Ski patrollers and avalanche control technicians at Vail Resorts properties in Colorado, including Vail, Beaver Creek, and Keystone, and at California's Kirkwood Mountain Resort, will now be equipped with airbag backpacks, which are designed to help keep wearers afloat and reduce the risk of trauma in the case of an avalanche.

"The safety of our employees and our guests are paramount at Vail Resorts and we are constantly looking at ways to help provide them with as-safe-as-possible environment at our resorts," says Blaise Carrig, president of the Mountain Division at Vail Resorts, regarding the recent purchase. "The BCA airbags are currently being evaluated by our resorts' ski patrol for snow control work and broader uses at our resorts."

The Vail patrollers will be outfitted with Backcountry Access Float 30 packs.

"Vail Resorts isn't the first, but it's certainly symbolic for other ski areas to see the biggest resort company in North America purchasing airbags for its ski patrols," said Bruce Edgerly, co-owner of Backcountry Access (BCA), a Colorado-based manufacturer of avalanche airbag pack devices and other safety equipment. "It's a standard best practice in the ski industry to equip your workers with the top safety equipment, and that increasingly includes avalanche airbag systems designed to help skiers caught in avalanches."

As of this season, fleets of airbag systems from manufacturers

including BCA, Mammut, Snowpulse, and ABS Avalanche Airbag Systems are also in place for ski patrollers at U.S. ski areas including Aspen, Jackson Hole, Loveland, Mission Ridge, Mount Baker, Telluride, Snowbird, and Wolf Creek, among others. Several heli-skiing operations – including Alaska's Chugach Powder Guides and British Columbia's Eagle Pass Heli-Skiing, Selkirk Tangiers Heli-Skiing, and Northern Escape Heli-Skiing – also now equip their guides with airbags and provide them to clients.

This week, two in-bounds avalanche fatalities occurred, the first of the 2012-13 season. On Monday, veteran ski patroller Bill Foster, 53, died while doing planned avalanche mitigation work at Alpine Meadows ski area following heavy snows in the area, and snowboarder Steven Mark Anderson, 49, was buried under 2 to 3 feet of snow at Donner Ski Ranch. Neither were wearing airbag packs, according to initial reports.

Edgerly says that while there's no one panacea answer to the avalanche problem, there's a growing body of raw data and anecdotal evidence supporting claims that airbags can help in worst-case situations like Monday's slides.

Skier Daron Rahlves deployed an airbag in a backcountry slide in Alaska's Northern Chugach Range last season while filming with Teton Gravity Research and said, "It definitely saved my life."

Snowboarder Meesh Hytner was filmed floating to safety with a BCA pack in January after getting caught in a backcountry slab slide near Montezuma, Colo. And pro skier Elyse Saugstad, a survivor of the much-publicized avalanche that claimed three lives on Stevens Pass in Washington last February, credits her survival to the pack made by German manufacturer ABS.

Sales of airbag devices spiked after the Stevens Pass slide and have remained steady ever since, Edgerly says.

"Airbags are certainly no substitute for good mountain sense

and education, and we would never suggest that you can get away with anything more with an airbag than you would without," Edgerly cautions. "The first step, to be sure, is getting educated. If you're a ski patroller doing any kind of avalanche control work or working around avalanche-prone terrain, I think it's a no-brainer to add an airbag bag to your toolkit."

Squaw's Ganong posts career best 7th in downhill

By USSA

BORMIO, Italy – Travis Ganong (Squaw Valley) delivered a gutsy run on the grueling Stelvio downhill to finish a career best seventh in Bormio.

0The second longest downhill on the Audi FIS Alpine World Cup tour, the Stelvio is known for its leg punishing ice and bumps while racers hit speeds of 75 mph. It was the tightest race in recent history with the top four separated by a mere .02 seconds.

Austrian Hannes Reichelt and Itlaian Dominik Paris tied for the win, 0.01 in front of World Cup downhill and overall leader Aksel Lund Svindal of Norway.

The punishing Stelvio downhill bucked 11 of the 55 starters off course.

Forestdale Road no longer open to snowmobilers

With plenty of snow on the ground, Forestdale Road in Hope Valley is closed to snowmobiles for the season as of Dec. 28.

The Carson Ranger District of the U.S. Forest Service prevents access because the are is next to the Mokelumne Wilderness Area and motorized vehicles are not allowed in any wilderness area.

Hope Valley Snopark is open to snowmobilers as a staging area.