Winter storm warning for Lake Tahoe Basin

The first winter storm warning of the season has been issued for Lake Tahoe from Monday at 6am through Tuesday at 11am.

Expect 4 to 8 inches below 7,000 feet, while above that level could receive 10 to 18 inches.

Rain is likely to be the first form of moisture before snow starts falling.

Winds will also be a problem, with ridge gusts expected to hit 100 mph.

The National Weather Service in Reno is saying driving in the basin and over the passes will sketchy during the brunt of the storm.

Snow is in the forecast through Thursday.

The highs this week are not expected to reach above 45 degrees. Lows will be in the 20s.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Pot grows threatening California's environment

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

California's annual medical marijuana harvest is just about done, but this year brings a new revelation sweeping the

nascent industry: The feel-good herb may not, in fact, be so good for the environment.

From golden Sierra foothills to forested coastal mountains, an explosion of pseudo-legal medical marijuana farms has dramatically changed the state's landscape over the past two years.

A rush to profit from patient demand for pot has resulted in irresponsible forest clearing, illegal stream diversions, and careless pesticide and fertilizer use that has polluted waterways and killed wildlife, state and local government officials said.

The problem has become so big and so unregulated that the California Department of Fish and Game has resorted to aerial surveys to assess its scale. It has a new high-resolution, computer-controlled camera mounted in the belly of an aircraft to help pinpoint problem marijuana areas.

In a recent flight over Nevada County, game warden Jerry Karnow was "astounded" at the increase in obvious marijuana grows visible from the air. They pop out as tightly clustered patches of vivid green plants in an otherwise sunbaked landscape, usually surrounded by tall fences.

In the course of a 90-minute flight, the visible grows numbered in the hundreds, often carved out of mixed oak and pine forests on steep, erosion-prone hillsides.

"I flew this last year and I'm seeing a whole bunch more than I did then," said Karnow, a warden in the region for 15 years. "This year it was unbelievable."

Medical marijuana grows fall into a different category from illegal "trespass grows," which tend to be hidden on public land and maintained by criminal organizations. Pot grown for medicinal use is found on private land and legally permitted under state law.

But the environmental problems they create are similar, in large part because the state's ability to regulate marijuana cultivation remains hazy. Though state law makes it legal to grow and use medical marijuana, it provides little guidance on how to regulate it.

In addition, medicinal grows remain illegal under federal law, putting state and local agencies on uncertain ground when they attempt to set limits.

"The impacts of water withdrawal, herbicide and pesticide use, unpermitted grading – all of these things in any other legal industry would be regulated. And we know how to regulate them," said Mark Lovelace, a Humboldt County supervisor who is grappling with the dilemma.

"In this case you can't bring them into compliance because the activity they are doing is fundamentally illegal according to the federal government."

1996 law didn't set limits

California voters legalized marijuana for medicinal purposes in 1996 when they approved Proposition 215. The law allowed patients with a doctor's recommendation to possess and grow marijuana in limited quantities, but did not set clear limits.

The Legislature tried to fix that loophole with Senate Bill 420, which took effect in 2004. It allowed Proposition 215 patients to cultivate no more than six mature or 12 immature plants. But the law was challenged in the state Supreme Court, which ruled in 2010 that the limit on plant numbers was invalid.

Many growers took this as endorsement to cultivate all the marijuana they wanted. This may have triggered the explosion of medicinal grow sites across the state that is now prompting environmental concern.

“The belief is to get what you can while the growing’s good, because it won’t last forever,” said Lovelace, who supports legal use of medicinal marijuana. “There are a lot of folks out there who just don’t care about the environmental harm they are doing.”

In California, local governments have authority over land use. They issue permits to grade new roads, terrace hillsides for agriculture and build ponds. When the matter exceeds local authority, such as withdrawing water from a stream to irrigate a crop, they require a property owner to obtain permission from the appropriate state or federal agency.

But their efforts to regulate medicinal marijuana cultivation have been largely unsuccessful.

In 2008, the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors adopted an ordinance regulating marijuana cultivation. It was a groundbreaking attempt to legitimize the medical marijuana industry and address environmental concerns and nuisance complaints from neighbors.

Under the ordinance, growers paid the county $50 per marijuana plant, each of which was then marked with a unique numbered “zip-tie” tag. The fee covered county regulatory costs, including inspections to ensure compliance with environmental standards. The grower industry welcomed the move and helped draft the rules.

But in January, the county decided to gut the ordinance after the U.S. Department of Justice warned that it violated federal law by permitting growers to cultivate a federally controlled substance. The notice included a warning that local government officials might be prosecuted individually.

This put a fast chill over other local government attempts to control the environmental effects of the rapidly growing industry.

Stream illegally dammed

Many marijuana growers strive to minimize environmental harm. Among other things, they want to create a product that is safe for humans to consume, free from harmful chemicals.

Patricia Smith, a Nevada County grower, adheres to a voluntary industry program called “Clean Green Certification” which licenses marijuana that meets certain environmental standards. She also supports appropriate government regulation.

“I don’t care if you’re giving it away for free. Certain safety standards have to be met,” said Smith, who chairs the county’s chapter of Americans for Safe Access, a marijuana advocacy group. “I’ll be the first to say not every person that is growing out there is an ethical person or a steward of the environment. I’ve seen some horrific things.”

In one recent case, game warden Karnow cited a Nevada County grower for illegally damming a stream that flows into Dry Creek, a tributary of the American River that supports salmon and steelhead. The grower excavated an 8-foot-tall earthen dam across the creek so he could pump water to a giant bladder, which then fed his cultivation site.

The grower pleaded no contest on Aug. 27 to a misdemeanor charge of illegally diverting the stream.

“He didn’t realize, apparently, the havoc he was wreaking by diverting the stream. And many of them don’t,” said Nevada County District Attorney Clifford Newell, whose office prosecuted the case. “They flaunt it being a natural herb. But many times there’s nothing natural about the plants they grow.”

Part of the problem is that marijuana consumers are often blind to the methods used to grow the crop – where the pot they are smoking was grown, or whether it was treated with pesticides.

“There’s a huge population of people who eat organic food for breakfast and don’t have any awareness at all of how their cannabis was cultivated or harvested,” said Alison Sterling Nichols, a Humboldt County environmental consultant working with county leaders to reduce the environmental cost of marijuana growing.

“They don’t even think about what was put on it or what trees came down to plant it. There’s just a complete disconnect.”

Pot grown in clearcuts

The consequences of that disconnect are especially acute in Humboldt and Mendocino counties, long the hotbed of marijuana cultivation in the state.

The demand for medical marijuana has produced thousands of new clearcuts in North Coast forests. In each case, dozens of trees are cut, the land is graded for planting, and water is procured – usually from the nearest stream – to irrigate the crop.

The region is struggling to restore endangered coho salmon in its coastal creeks. Millions of dollars have been spent on restoration projects, and logging and agriculture are under strict regulation. At the same time, marijuana cultivation has exploded.

“What I’ve seen is kind of similar to how logging used to take place back in the early days, before laws were really strong,” said Scott Bauer, an environmental scientist and coho recovery coordinator at the Department of Fish and Game office in Eureka.

“It’s this gold-rush mentality right now, where everybody’s out to get their piece of the action. So you see these grows have gotten substantially bigger over the past couple of years.”

One reason is that Proposition 215 allows medical marijuana users to form “collectives” to grow marijuana. A single grower can gather the doctor certificates from many patients and grow marijuana on their behalf. Instead of one person growing six mature plants, large grows have become common with hundreds of plants cultivated on behalf of many patients.

Bauer said some growers fell trees, push them over the edge of a hillside, then bulldoze dirt on top of the trees to create flat planting areas. The bulldozed trees eventually rot, and in the next big storm, the piled soil cascades into the creek below, burying fish-spawning habitat.

Most of these grows get water from the nearest stream, Bauer said. Normally this requires a stream alteration permit from Fish and Game. But many growers either don’t know that or don’t care, and set about engineering makeshift dams and ponds.

Wildlife put at risk

Growers are tapping this water when wildlife need it most. The North Coast is known for its heavy rainfall. But that usually stops by June, and wildlife must survive through summer and fall on water that fills the streams from springs and seeps. This is also when marijuana plants demand the most water.

Often water cannot be delivered by gravity flow to a cultivation site. So growers run diesel generators to power water pumps, which in turn fill storage tanks. The pumps may only run a few hours a day, but that can be enough to do serious harm.

“During that time, there is a dewatering process that will occur for hundreds of feet below the pump site,” said Jackie Krug, a Humboldt County game warden. “You may not even realize the impacts you’ve just had, but you’ve just killed everything in that stretch of stream.”

State officials are caught in the same legal bind that precludes local governments from regulating the industry. Fish and Game, for instance, is happy to consider issuing streambed alteration permits to marijuana growers, but only under a kind of “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy.

“If somebody were to call and say, ‘I’m diverting water, I need a permit,’ we’re not going to ask what that diversion is for,” said Bauer.

Fish and Game is working to assess the industrywide water demand on the North Coast. It will start by examining a single watershed using aerial surveys to count marijuana grows. The goal is to understand how the industry is affecting the regional environment.

Others hope consumer and grower education help address the problem.

“As long as we can’t regulate it as a community, we have to rely on it being successfully self-regulated, which is rare in any industry,” said Nichols. “It’s just time to be less greedy and more responsible.”

Truckee River watershed receives special designation

The Truckee River watershed has recently been designated as one of the newest sites by the National Forest Foundation as a part of the “Treasured Landscapes – Unforgettable Experiences” program.

Vance Russell, National Forest Foundation California director explained the vision for the area, “As one of the 14 designated Treasured Landscape sites nationwide, our goals for the Truckee River watershed are to ensure healthy forests and healthy and abundant water in the Truckee River watershed in conjunction with the community. There are many beautiful National Forests, but the Truckee River stood out due to the partnerships and the community support for its restoration.”

The Truckee River watershed NFF site is 234,000 acres and includes public land within the Tahoe National Forest and the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit. The primary objective will be to complete key restoration work by 2017 with ecological, economic, and social benefits from the work continuing in perpetuity.

Impacts to the watershed have occurred over the past 150 years and date back to the construction of the transcontinental railroad and the discovery of gold and silver. A legacy of resource extraction, road and railroad construction, hydrologic modification, fire and fire suppression, and development and extensive recreation has seriously impacted the watershed.

Sports figures to be inducted into Reno hall of fame

The Tahoe-Reno region has a proud history of producing world-class athletes, including dozens of Olympians, Paralympians, coaches and sports pioneers. The Reno Tahoe Winter Games Coalition will honor these sports figures by inducting them

into the Reno Tahoe International Sports Hall of Fame.

Inductees include:

· Wayne Adams: The Reno native won three consecutive Nevada State Amateur Golf Championships (1947-49).

· Shannon Bahrke: Born in Reno and raised in Tahoe City, she is the only U.S. women to win multiple Olympic freestyle skiing medals.

· Shawn Estes: The Douglas High graduate was the 11th player selected in the 1991 Major League Baseball draft by the Seattle Mariners. Shawn made his biggest splash in the majors after being traded to the San Francisco Giants in 1995.

· Joe Sellers: The longtime high school coach, administrator and athletic director served in various roles at three area high schools (Hug, Wooster and Bishop Manogue).

The event is Nov.17 at the Atlantis Casino in Reno. Reserve tickets by calling (775) 622.1889.

Heavenly Foundation looking for skiers, snowboarders

The Heavenly Ski and Snowboard Foundation is accepting registrations for the 201213 competitive and development ski and snowboard programs.

The foundation has something for all ages and levels of skiers and riders.

The development programs run Dec. 1 through March 31.

For more information, e-mail aimix@heavenlyfoundationteam.org or call (530) 541.7354.

Mountain bikers to work on Whites Creek trail

TAMBA will be finishing off the season Oct. 20 with a trail day on Whites Creek. This is the first organized trail day on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest.

Meet at 9am at the Whites Creek Day Use parking lot off of Timberline Drive.

Lunch will be provided for all those who RSVP. There will also be ice cold refreshments at the end of the day.

Work will consist of repairing trail tread in sections seeing erosion above the creek, removal of some of the pedal catching brush stumps, general pruning, and revegetation of some areas along the trail.

Wear long pants, long sleeves and sturdy shoes.

Website helps victims find stolen bikes

By Aaron Sankin, Huffington Post

Coming outside to see an empty rack where your bicycle used to

be is one of the painful realities of living in a major city.

No matter how strong your lock is, there's never a guarantee that it will be there when you get back—no matter how safe the neighborhood typically is.

But Stolen Bike Finder, a new search engine built by the bloggers at Priceonomics, could make bike theft a thing of the past.

The tool works by not only helping you retrieve your stolen bike but also by disincentivizing thieves from absconding with your ride in the first place. The site's founders assumed that if they could make it more expensive and difficult for thieves to fence a stolen bike, it would make them less likely to do so.

The authors explained, "The solution we built is based on the only effective solution to bike theft we've encountered — self-policing by victims. If your bike is stolen, try to find where the thief is selling it and stop them.

The site allows users to enter the make and model of their stolen bike and see if anything similar is being sold anywhere in the country on auction sites like eBay and Craigslist. Visitors will be notified whenever a bike matching the description of the one they lost pops up.

A forum for people to safely buy and sell their bikes with verified proof of ownership exists alongside the search tool.

Priceonomics has regularly posted about the economics of bike theft, arguing it's so common because the crime involves a low likelihood of being caught and light penalties for those who are.

Tahoe resorts not well regarded by Ski magazine readers

Not one Lake Tahoe area ski resort made it into the top 10 of *Ski* magazine's annual reader survey.

Mammoth – while not Tahoe – is the only California resort to make it in the top 20. It came in at No. 18.

The Tahoe resorts making the top 30 are Northstar at 27, Heavenly Mountain Resort at 28, and Squaw Valley at 29.

The top resort this year is Whistler Blackcomb in British Columbia – home of the 2010 Winter Olympics.

No Tahoe resort made it into the top five of the subcategories. Those were nightlife, go big or go home, top chefs, powder,

The top 10 California-Nevada resorts are:

• Mammoth

• Northstar

• Heavenly

• Squaw Valley

• Sugar Bowl

• Mt. Rose

• Alpine Meadow

- Kirkwood
- Homewood
- Sierra-at-Tahoe.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Prescribed burns to begin in Tunnel Creek area

The Nevada Division of Forestry will be conducting prescribed burns at Tunnel Creek in the Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park backcountry during October and November, weather permitting.

The Tunnel Creek road, from Highway 28 to Tunnel Creek Station, may be closed in order to conduct the burns. Signs will be posted throughout the area when burns are being conducted. Nearly 75 acres will be treated in 12 treatment units.

The burns are part of ongoing fuels treatment and forest restoration efforts being conducted by the Nevada Tahoe Resource Team in the Lake Tahoe area. The goal of the project is to create a healthier forest and to make the area more resistant to catastrophic wildfire.

The Tunnel Creek burns are being conducted by the Nevada Division of Forestry in cooperation with the Division of State Parks, the Division of State Lands and the North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District.

Weather patterns will be monitored for smoke management prior to and during burns. The timing of the burns depends on

optimum weather conditions and steps will be made to minimize impacts to park visitors.

For more information, call (775) 684.2500.

Time to work on backcountry trails before snow arrives

Snowlands Networks’ trail event Oct. 27-28 is focused on maintenance on a number of trails in the Loon Lake area. Snowlands Network helped expand the trail system there over several years. Now it’s time for maintenance.

El Dorado Nordic Ski Patrol is leading this event.

Work one or two days. Camping is available Friday and Saturday nights.

No experience is required to help mark and maintain the trails. The necessary equipment will be supplied. You bring your lunch. Wear old clothes.

For more information or to sign up, contact Monte Hendricks (530) 644.6891 or montehendricks@comcast.net.