

Recyclables going to landfills as economics erode

By Bob Tita, Wall Street Journal

The U.S. recycling industry is breaking down.

Prices for scrap paper and plastic have collapsed, leading local officials across the country to charge residents more to collect recyclables and send some to landfills. Used newspapers, cardboard boxes and plastic bottles are piling up at plants that can't make a profit processing them for export or domestic markets.

U.S. recycling programs took off in the 1990s as calls to bury less trash in landfills coincided with China's demand for materials such as corrugated cardboard to feed its economic boom. Shipping lines eagerly filled containers that had brought manufactured goods to the U.S. with paper, scrap metal and plastic bottles for the return trip to China.

Read the whole story

Novasel, Curtzwiler head for Nov. showdown



Either Sue Novasel or Kenny Curtzwiler will be the District 5 supervisor.

Updated June 6, 12:43am:

By Susan Wood

The two El Dorado County District 5 supervisor candidates on opposite ends of the political spectrum will face each other in November, a rematch of four years ago.

With all precincts reporting, incumbent Sue Novasel has 1,604 votes at 36.9 percent; while Kenny Curtzwiler is close behind with 1,419 votes at 32.64 percent.

Both were being challenged by transportation planner Jeffrey Spencer, in third with 16.52 percent (718 votes), and former supervisor Norma Santiago at 13.73 percent, (597 votes).

Of the 19,624 registered to vote in District 5, 4,347 votes were counted. These are all preliminary numbers until the election is certified within one month.

For Novasel, her optimism that her lead would hold in the June 5 primary was well founded, especially since she's been here before with Curtzwiler. Four years ago the picture was a little different with a wider gap. This year there is about a 5 percentage point differential.

“I’m not surprised. Kenny had a lot more support than last time,” she said after early returns. “This is actually where I thought I’d be.”

A phone call to Curtzwiler was unreturned.

Novasel told *Lake Tahoe News* she was a little concerned with having another Democrat on the ballot (meaning Santiago) to possibly split the votes. The statewide election system – which has undergone a slew of changes in the last few years – now requires voters to cast their ballots along party lines, unless they are undeclared.

Incumbent Mike Ranalli, who is trying to keep his supervisorial seat in District 4, has 50.03 percent, with 3,599 votes. Because he had more than 50 percent plus one vote he will not have a race in November.

700 gallons of jet fuel spills near American River

By Molly Sullivan, Sacramento Bee

A tanker truck carrying jet fuel overturned on Highway 193 north of Placerville, spilling hundreds of gallons of fuel and closing a portion of the highway, Caltrans District 3 announced Monday.

Shortly after 4am, the driver lost control of the truck while driving downhill near Chili Bar Reservoir, a popular spot for rafting, said Steve Nelson, Caltrans spokesman. The truck was carrying 800 gallons of jet fuel and another tank full of

pesticides.

Read the whole story

Scrutinizing Google's influence on elections

By Ronald Robertson, The Conversation

As the 2018 midterm elections approach in the U.S., Google's power to influence undecided voters remains overshadowed by Facebook's personal data crisis.

Facebook has "taken it on the chin" for its role in the 2016 presidential election, and organizations like the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica and the Russian troll farm known as the Internet Research Agency have dominated headlines. Yet, despite having a troubling history and collecting more personal data through more products than Facebook, Google has somehow managed to evade the public spotlight on this one. That may be changing.

The U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee recently sent Google a letter asking a series of questions about the company's personal data protections. As one of the researchers who helped discover that search engines can substantially influence users' voting preferences, I found the last question to be the most intriguing: "Are you aware of any foreign entities seeking to influence or interfere with U.S. elections through your platforms?" If Google's response to this question exists, it has not been made public.

Search engine influence

Since 2013, I've been involved in the design and execution of a long series of experiments that have demonstrated how search engines can influence undecided voters' candidate choices through nearly undetectable manipulations to search rankings. We labeled this powerful new form of influence the search engine manipulation effect.

The way this effect works is simple: Favoritism for a particular candidate in election-related search rankings leads to people preferring that candidate. For example, a search related to an upcoming election might return results favoring candidate A higher than results favoring candidate B. That's called partisan ranking bias. Since people tend to click on and trust highly ranked results, more people will then trust and consume the information supporting candidate A. In turn, that consumption increases their preference for candidate A.

The most important aspect of this effect, however, is that most people can't detect the partisan ranking bias – and it's virtually impossible to defend yourself from influences you can't perceive. Fortunately, in three follow-up experiments, involving 3,600 participants, we demonstrated that alerting people to partisan ranking bias can help suppress the effect – though only laws or regulations actually preventing partisan ranking could eliminate the effect entirely.

Why focus on Google?

Google handles more than 60 percent of internet search activity in the U.S., and nearly 90 percent worldwide. Every year, this translates to trillions of queries related to people's private thoughts, concerns and questions.

With respect to news, search engines are a bigger source than social media. Although an often cited 2016 Pew study found that a majority, 62 percent, of U.S. adults got news on social media, the devil is in the details. If you unpack that statistic, you'll find that 18 percent do so "hardly ever."

Added to the 38 percent of Americans who “never” got news on social media, the same study suggests that social media is a negligible source of news for 56 percent of Americans, also a majority.

Think about it: When you need to fact-check something or learn more about a topic, what do you do? You Google it. This fact is supported by a recent international survey that found that 74 percent of participants reported using search engines to fact-check information they found on social media. The same survey found that 68 percent reported that the information they found while searching was “important to influencing their decisions about voting.”

What does Google think?

Google’s executives rarely make public responses to critiques of its search system. But in 2015, my colleague Robert Epstein published an article in *Politico* – entitled “How Google Could Rig the 2016 Election” – and that did the trick. Google’s head of search at the time, Amit Singhal, responded with his own article, calling Epstein a conspiracy theorist, stating that “there is absolutely no truth to Epstein’s hypothesis that Google could work secretly to influence election outcomes” and that “Google has never ever re-ranked search results on any topic (including elections) to manipulate user sentiment.”

Singhal’s first claim is hard to believe, unless you dismiss our research, our replication, and the independent research built on our findings. Search engines do have the capacity to shift people’s opinions, including who to vote for.

His second claim, that Google “never ever re-ranked search results,” also doesn’t quite hold up: The EU recently fined the company \$2.7 billion for ranking its own services higher in search results than its competitors.

Defending democracy

Another one of the Judiciary Committee's questions to Google also struck a chord with me: "How do you monitor the ability of foreign entities to influence and interfere with U.S. elections?"

This question struck me because I've been developing systems for exactly this purpose – preserving search rankings and analyzing them for systematic differences – for several years. In the course of this work, however, I've come to believe that freeing the democratic process from technologically enabled influences is virtually impossible without the cooperation of modern tech giants.

Facebook is now offering to collaborate with academic researchers who can measure and perhaps lessen or prevent undue influence on elections, and Twitter is doing something similar. Related efforts are also bringing transparency to other platforms like YouTube and Reddit. When will Google get on board?

At an upcoming conference, I will present the latest system I've been designing with Christo Wilson, a leading scientist in the field of algorithm auditing, for monitoring search rankings for partisan bias. With a little assistance from Google, no more than Facebook is offering, accurately monitoring or preventing search engine influence in the 2018 elections is actually a feasible goal. Without the company's help, things look bleak.

Although Google is an advertising business, its core is composed of creative and intelligent individuals who care deeply about the impact their work has on the world. This is evidenced by the recent letter signed by more than 3,100 Google employees protesting the use of their work in warfare technology. Nearly a dozen Google workers went so far as to resign in protest.

Perhaps the day is fast approaching when Google will step up,

as Facebook, Twitter and Reddit have, to help defend democracy from the new world of computational propaganda. Perhaps there is already a letter circulating internally and gathering signatures. With state and federal primary elections already underway, let's hope so.

Ronald Robertson is a doctoral student in network science at Northeastern University.

Tahoe deputies help find missing UC Davis research robot

By Michael Mcgough, Sacramento Bee

Deputies with a Lake Tahoe patrol crew helped recover a malfunctioning robot deployed by UC Davis researchers to study climate change, Placer County Sheriff's Office reported Sunday on Facebook.

And it's a good thing they picked it up before someone else did, because the yellow-and-blue device bears a fairly strong resemblance to a torpedo.

The autonomous underwater vehicle, nicknamed a "glider," was studying the lake's relationship with the area's winds and temperatures as part of a mission for the university's Tahoe Environmental Research Center.

Read the whole story

Vail Resorts to run Lakeland Village condos in SLT

By Kathryn Reed

Vail Resorts is about to have a greater presence in South Lake Tahoe as the company takes over the management and day-to-day operations of Lakeland Village on Oct. 1.

The lakefront condo development has been run by Aqua Aston Hospitality for the last nine years.

“Vail is a top notch company. It’s hard to compete with them. Their niche is mountain resort environments,” Ron Armijo, president of Lakeland Village home owners association board of directors, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “(Vail) is going to be part of the Lake Tahoe fabric for a long time. We want to be part of that. We meld very well with the goals and values that Vail has to offer.”

What all Vail will bring to the table has not been disclosed. What Armijo likes, though, is the potential for ski deals and summer adventures at Heavenly-Kirkwood-Northstar, all Vail properties, for Lakeland guests. He also cited the 67 mountain weddings at Heavenly last year, adding, “They need a place to put all those people.”



And while it was the recommendation of Lakeland's Rental Management Advisory Committee (RMAC) to go with Vail as well, not all of the homeowners are happy with the decision.

Already gone is Jerry Bindel, who was general manager of the property for 19 years. He resigned earlier this year after the board voted to go with Vail. He is now with Forest Suites.

"We always worried we would lose Jerry. He knows everything about all parts of Lakeland," Sheila Starcevich told *LTN*. She and husband Howie Friedman have lived full time at the property since 2002.

"Almost all the long-term employees are leaving," Friedman said. "Housekeeping is down to a skeletal crew."

Of the 260 units on the property that fronts Highway 50, about 165 are rented through Aston, another 30 or so use a different rental firm or do it themselves, and the rest are owner-occupied or second homes.

Aston is looking to have an off-site office where it would continue to manage condos for people who don't want to leave their company. No one from Aston's corporate headquarters in Hawaii returned calls. People on property would not talk on the record with *LTN*.

"My position is to maintain the strength of Lakeland Village in the community. To break it apart into multiple companies doesn't make a lot of sense, but it's up to the owners," Armijo said. "There is a lot to consider. It's not just the numbers; it's the amenities, the way we want the property to be managed and operated."

The management company is responsible for staffing the front desk and housekeeping, and maintaining the pools, hot tubs, and grounds.

Issues with Aston had more to do with people at corporate than with local staff. One issue was over site-wide internet, something the management company wouldn't pay for or install. An eleventh-hour addendum to Aston's offer once they go wind Vail was the preferred company came with a deal to install internet.

"It seemed to us that they were charging for things that either didn't need to be done or that they were outright not doing – like the annual deep cleaning which costs a lot, but the units didn't look that much cleaner," Virginia Glenn told *Lake Tahoe News* of Aston. She and husband Norm have had rentals at Lakeland for a handful of years and he's on the RMAC.

The entire management agreement process has not been smooth. It started more than a year ago with Aston and Vail the only to apply. According to the board president, bids go out every three years, with this being the first time there was competition.

Since then multiple emails and letters have been exchanged between owners, the board, board committee, and Aston – with some of them described as "nasty."

Still, the majority is happy to have Aston gone, which is why the company was voted out. Even so, it was not a unanimous vote of the board to hire Vail.

Vail entered the local lodging market in 2010 when it bought Accommodation Station, which at the time was the third largest property management company on the South Shore. It was since been renamed Lake Tahoe Lodging Company. Last year Vail took over the property management of Zalanta, the condos across from Heavenly Village.

Vail was not forthcoming with how things will work at Lakeland. Employees and owners not on the board said the same thing about Vail, adding that workers have been told they will have to reapply for their jobs and that many of the long-time staff fear their salaries will be substantially reduced even if they have a job.

Kevin Cooper who runs the PR department locally for Vail Resorts merely told *LTN*, "Our teams are working closely with the Lakeland Village team, and we look forward to a smooth transition of operational responsibilities."

Lesli Carlson, manager for corporate communications for Vail, also didn't answer *Lake Tahoe News*' questions and responded with equal amount of fluff.

Here are *LTN*'s unanswered questions for Vail Resorts:

- *Is it true Lake Tahoe Lodging Company will be running things?*
- *Will you bring the entire operation to Lakeland, keep it off-site or have two locations?*
- *Do you know how many units you will be operating at Lakeland? How many units do you have through LTLC?*
- *I understand Vail operates under a three-tiered level, renting out "gold" properties first. True? Can you explain how this works?*
- *Is there a certain criteria to be listed with Vail or can any Lakeland unit be in the rental mix?*
- *Will Vail keep the front desk?*
- *Will Vail keep the employees? Bring in new people? Do people have to reapply for their jobs? Will wages/benefits stay the same? How many employees will you have at Lakeland? Will you bring in a general manager?*

· *Why was Vail interested in running this lodging property?*

Vail Resorts on ski resort buying spree

By Matt Pepin, Boston Globe

Vail Resorts, the Colorado-based owner of ski areas around North America, is continuing its expansion on both coasts and in Colorado.

Vermont's Okemo Mountain announced Monday morning that it has entered into a purchase agreement with Vail Resorts that also includes New Hampshire's Mount Sunapee and Colorado's Crested Butte. Vail also bought Stevens Pass ski area in Washington state. The sales are expected to be completed this summer.

Vail owns Heavenly, Kirkwood and Northstar in the Tahoe area.

Read the whole story

Challenge to prevent Sierra forest fire catastrophe

By Linda Fine Conaboy

INCLINE VILLAGE – “It's not a matter of getting better at firefighting, it's now a matter of too much stuff for fires to

burn,” Malcolm North, forest ecologist with the U.S. Forest Service Pacific Southwest Research Station said, explaining that in 2017, the costs to fight fires was upward of \$3 billion. “We’re losing the forest fire battle. It’s not whether fire will occur, it’s when.

“We have two choices. We can continue to deny that we can control fire or we can get in front of it and learn how to be smarter when it comes to forest fires.”

Forest fire and drought are top-of-mind for those who live in, or close to, the Sierra Nevada, as attested to by the packed house last week at a UC Davis TERC presentation at Sierra Nevada College on managing fire and drought in the Sierra Nevada.

The room was jammed as North did his best to explain the symbiotic nature of fire, fuels and forest inhabitants.



“The goal for a resilient forest and happy owls is big trees and moisture.”
– *Malcolm North*

Beginning with why our forests are unhealthy, with a nod to spotted owls and the role they play, followed by data

collection and finally, circling back to managing forests so that all creatures can live out their lives despite climate change, drought and wildfire, North wove his four intertwined topics into a fascinating saga.

“It doesn’t take a forest ecologist to see that our forests are in bad shape. Clearly, something is out of whack,” North said.

He blames early clear-cutting in the Sierra during the Gold Rush time period for the beginning of an irrevocable alteration of the forests. “Large, fire resistant trees were cut and ‘defect’ trees were eliminated,” he said. “But in actuality, these gnarled, crooked trees (defect trees) are the nexus for wildlife—like owls. This was not a good idea.”

Additionally, fire suppression changed the forests in the Sierra Nevada forever, causing incredible density on the forest floor, thus providing fire with the fuel it needs to easily burn.

“Fire is actually essential in a forest. Eliminating fire, like for the last 100 years, causes crown fires,” he added. “In the past, fires occurred every 10-15 years, adding life to the forest.”

Long ago, a typical, healthy forest supported about 64 trees per acre with a diameter of about 26 inches; now, there are about 320 trees on an acre with measly girths of 14 inches or so.

Canopy cover totaled 32 percent of the green foliage aloft; now, the dense forest canopy averages 65 percent.

Forests, North said, used to be able to recover and reseed themselves, but now money is going directly to fire suppression, not to the necessary replanting of a fire-ravaged forest, causing lots of shrub fields to grow, further exacerbating the problem.

Additionally, the elimination of repeated fires (every 10-15 years) means that there is now competition for water.

“Lack of water causes stressed trees, which are becoming overwhelmed by beetles who can sense when a tree is unhealthy. There’s never been a precedent for beetle infestation in the Sierra,” North said. “Beetle mortality is particularly accelerating the loss of large, tall, old-growth trees.”

He added that sugar pines are in a reduced state not only because of drought and forest mismanagement, but also because of rust. “Beetles are just a pile on,” he said.

Add to all of this the spotted owl, whose now-protected habitat is a roadblock to forest restoration and resilience. According to North, owls need lots of tree canopy to thrive as do northern flying squirrels, Pacific fisher and northern goshawk. “Actually, 70 percent canopy is good for owls; bad for fire.”

To determine the amount of actual available canopy cover, some means of measurement needed to be utilized, North said. “If canopy structure is so important, how accurately is it measured? Not so well,” he said. “Measurements are crude and inaccurate. The Forest Service doesn’t even accurately measure canopy cover.”

Enter LiDAR (light detection and ranging) a remote sensing method used to examine the surface of the Earth. In actuality, LiDAR analysis found that owls really don’t need masses of dense ground cover, but they do need canopy cover to survive.

“So maybe ladder fuels (live or dead vegetation that allows a fire to climb up from the landscape into the tree canopy) can be reduced without endangering owl habitat,” North mused.

As he prepared to wind up his talk, he arrived at his final topic—how to meld owls’ needs with wildfire resistance? He suggested that tree planting patterns are key to a healthy

forest. For example, trees need to conform to a group/gap situation where groups of trees are surrounded by gaps of space. “There’s a tight coupling among ecosystem processes—forest heterogeneity supports fire diversity.

“Old-growth forests with restored fire patterns in Yosemite and Sequoia national parks all exhibited the same needs—tall trees, snags and moisture. The goal for a resilient forest and happy owls is big trees and moisture.”

Audit: Calif. underreporting hate crimes

By Alexei Koseff, Sacramento Bee

While law enforcement officials have identified hate crimes as a growing problem in California, it is worse than the numbers would suggest.

California is undercounting hate crimes, according to a state audit released Thursday, because outdated policies have led law enforcement agencies to misidentify or fail to report incidents.

Hate crimes are criminal acts committed, at least in part, based on real or perceived characteristics of the victim, such as race, religion, gender, sexuality or disability. They spiked by more than 11 percent in 2016, the most recent year of data available, with race-related crimes topping the list.

Read the whole story

Big One could leave 250,000+ quake refugees in Calif.



People walk toward the Ferry Building on Market Street after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Photo/Library of Congress

By Rong-Gong Lin II and Sarah Parvini, Los Angeles Times

When a catastrophic earthquake hits California, buildings will topple and potentially hundreds could be killed.

But what gets less attention is the wrenching aftermath of such a huge temblor, which could leave whole neighborhoods torched by fires uninhabitable and hundreds of thousands of people without a home.

Officials are grappling with where all these quake refugees would go.

Read the whole story