Nev.’s death rate from meth, other stimulants highest in nation

By Jessie Bekker, Las Vegas Review-Journal

Nevada’s amphetamine death rate is highest in the nation and will soon eclipse the state’s prescription opioid death rate if current trends continue, according to a new report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The death rate in Nevada attributed to “psychostimulants” – a class of drugs that includes methamphetamine, ecstasy and ADHD prescription drugs like Adderall and Ritalin – hit 7.5 per 100,00 in 2016, up nearly 32 percent from 2015. Prescription opioid deaths fell about 9 percent in the same time period, from 9.8 per 100,000 to 8.9 per 100,000, the CDC said.

The CDC report studied data from 31 states and Washington, D.C.

Read the whole story

Study: Little chance of new affordable housing at Tahoe

By Associated Press

A new study on housing availability in western Nevada says there’s little hope of expanding affordable rental opportunities for residents on the shore of Lake Tahoe.

The study concludes the “sheer expense” of development in Douglas County from south of Sand Harbor to the California line “makes it impractical for the development of affordable housing.”

Read the whole story

CalFire helicopters cost twice as much as expected

By Adam Ashton, Sacramento Bee

CalFire wants to swap its fleet of “Apocalypse Now”-era firefighting helicopters for something a little more “Zero Dark Thirty.”

The trouble is the machines the department is ready to buy cost twice as much as the Legislature expected when it set aside money two years ago to start buying new choppers.

It took three rounds of bidding over two years to complete a process that rejected the low bidder, Italian manufacturer AgustaWestland, each time.

Read the whole story

Wildfire prevention takes a

backseat in Calif.

By Julie Cart, CalMatters

Dave Kinateder has a keen eye for trees. But when Kinateder, a fire ecologist in the Plumas National Forest, surveys a hillside lush with pines, he doesn't see abundance or the glory of nature's bounty.

He sees a disaster-in-waiting.

"It's a ticking time bomb," he said, gazing across the dense, green carpet of trees near Quincy, a small community high in the northern Sierra Nevada.

Last year's wildfires, the worst in modern California history, have put a microscope on the forests that cover a third of the state – in particular, on managing these wooded lands in ways that would reduce the frequency and intensity of such blazes.

California is grappling with the counterintuitive dilemma of too many trees, packed too closely together, robbed of the space they need to thrive—and with how to clear out more than 100 million dead trees, felled by drought or insects, that provide tinder for the next infernos.

Curing these unhealthy forests is difficult and expensive, and as with human health, prevention is far less costly than treatment. But these days the state firefighting agency, CalFire, spends the bulk of its resources battling fires rather than practicing preventive measures.

At stake is nothing less than life, property, air quality and the lands that hold most of California's water. A state commission recently prescribed radical changes to address what it terms the "neglect" of California's largest forests.

A 19th-century California forest would have held fewer than 50 trees an acre. Today the state's forests have grown to an

unnatural 300 to 500 trees an acre, or more. That doesn't count the 2 million drought-stressed trees a month lost to bark beetles that have killed entire stands.

Gov. Jerry Brown, who in 2014 declared tree mortality a state of emergency, said in his January state of the state address that California needs to manage its forests more intelligently. He vowed to convene a task force "to review thoroughly the way our forests are managed and suggest ways to reduce the threat of devastating fires."

California has dozens of agencies attacking problem but still cannot keep up with the work. Crews around the state have been busy clearing trees as fast as funding allows. This wielding of chainsaws they call "whacking and stacking" leaves massive wood piles along highways in some areas. But it amounts to no more than triage: Cal Fire removes trees on fewer than 40,000 acres a year, far short of its goal of clearing a half-million acres annually.

Kinateder estimates that removing trees in this way costs as much as $1,400 an acre. By comparison, controlled burns—those set by fire managers to remove vegetation from forests—is a bargain at less than $150 an acre. Fighting a wildfire comes in at just over $800 an acre, according to the report.

Far from the forest floor, California officials are wrestling with the financial and environmental cost of the state's forest practices. At a hearing in March in Sacramento, legislators listened to lurid descriptions of raging fire and wrenching stories of human misery recounted by a stream of state and local officials: flames rearing up like an enormous beast, residents running for their lives, neighborhoods leveled, fire burning so hot and for so long that soils were rendered sterile.

A portion of the proceedings focused on a recent report about wildfires and forest health from the Little Hoover Commission,

an independent state oversight agency that gave its findings to the governor and Legislature in February. The document pulled no punches, calling the state of the Sierra Nevada's forests "an unprecedented environmental catastrophe."

It cited a century of "mismanaging" the 10 million wooded acres in the Sierra, calling out state and federal firefighting agencies for their longstanding policy of aggressively putting out all fires rather than letting those that can safely burn do so, thereby thinning the choked woodlands.

Helge Eng, deputy director of CalFire, acknowledged the report was "spot on" in its assessment of the state of the Sierra, adding that the analysis "did an especially good job of recognizing that there are no easy, black-and-white answers to the problems we are facing."

CalFire boasts that it stops 95 percent of fires at 10 acres or less, saving lives, property and entire forests from conflagration. Fire experts argue that a negative could be turned into a positive if fire bosses let them burn while still steering them away from people and structures and toward overgrown wildlands in need of clearing.

That's an approach sometimes used by the National Park Service, but it's difficult to defend when forests are ablaze, frightening the public and many elected officials alike.

Still, the report said, "it is not enough for agency leaders, scientists and advocates to recognize the benefits of fire as a tool; the bureaucracy of the state government and public sentiment as a whole must undergo a culture shift to embrace fire as a tool for forest health."

Eng said CalFire is considering adopting the managed-burn approach, when appropriate, but noted that federal firefighters are often working in wild settings, away from development.

“CalFire’s mission is different; we protect life and property” in areas that may be densely populated, Eng said in a written response to questions. “There is most often not an opportunity to let a fire burn. The risk to human life is just too great.”

The report also detailed a public safety threat from 129 million dead trees, the crushing cost—up to $1,000 a tree—to private property owners to have trees removed from their land and the enormous burden on rural governments to both recover from fire and prepare their forests to mitigate the intensity of the next one. In no uncertain terms, the commission prescribed dramatically ramping up tree-thinning projects and, as awful as the optics are, creating and controlling some fires to achieve the same result.

Eng agreed that the state firefighting agency was far from achieving its “aspirational” goal of clearing a half-million acres of land each year, citing such impediments as “the logistics of capacity of staff and equipment and environmental compliance,” among other factors.

In a moment notable for its rarity in Sacramento, there was bipartisan agreement in the hearing room this month about the problem, its scope and the appropriate measures to deal with it. Focus more intensely on the problem, they agreed, and throw money at it. The state spent $900 million fighting fires last year. Just one of those late-season blazes caused more than $9 billion in reported property damage.

“We’ve made mistakes, and we’ve created systems that are unwieldy…. It’s all of our fault,” Jim Branham, executive officer of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency, told *CalMatters*. “Money alone won’t solve it, but we won’t solve it without money, either.”

The mosaic of land ownership in California means the state owns only 2 percent of the forests but has legal responsibility over much more: 31 million acres, including

land in rural counties.

CalFire received more than $200 million for forest health projects last year and has proposed an additional $160 million for the next fiscal year. Those sums are on top of the agency's current $2.7 billion budget. CalFire, in turn, doles out millions of those dollars in grants to local governments and community groups to do some thinning themselves, and it teams with the federal Forest Service to tackle clearing projects.

The work to improve forest health dovetails with other state priorities—protecting water sources and reducing greenhouse-gas emissions.

The Sierra Nevada range is the headwaters for 60 percent of California's developed water supply. Burned, denuded hillsides don't store water efficiently when it rains. Sediment cascades downhill, filling streams, affecting water quality and loading up reservoirs, reducing their storage capacity

The carbon equation is equally direct: When trees burn or decay, they release greenhouse gases. The 2013 Rim Fire near Yosemite National Park produced emissions equal to those of 2.3 million cars in a year.

Prescribed burns emit less carbon than higher-intensity fires, because managed fire is aimed at smaller trees and shrubs. Cleared forest land may still ignite, but it will burn with less intensity and fewer emissions.

Moreover, when trees die, they stop absorbing carbon from the atmosphere. The state depends on that critical service to help reduce greenhouse gases. Research suggests that severely burned areas regrow with shrubs or grasses, plants that store about 10 percent less carbon than trees do.

John Moorlach, a Republican state senator from Costa Mesa, suggests the Democratic governor, a champion of the fight

against climate change, has a “gigantic blind spot” when it comes to reducing carbon emissions. Moorlach said in an interview that Brown’s emphasis on electric cars, for example, ignores the role of fire in California’s greenhouse gas inventory.

“We’re being absolute phonies about climate change if we are not dealing with the real driver of greenhouse gas; that’s these wildfires,” said Moorlach. He has proposed that the state dedicate 25 percent of the revenue from its cap and trade grreenhouse-gas-reduction system to help counties’ fire mitigation efforts.

Counties would welcome the help. Randy Hanvelt, a supervisor in Tuolumne County, said that where forest management is concerned, there’s a “leadership problem.”

“Talk is cheap,” he said. “We have got ourselves a giant colossal mess. This is a war of sorts. Time is against us. Every available tool has to be applied.”

One such tool is carefully designed burns. But the meticulous planning necessary can take two to three years, and the burns require favorable weather, a permit from the local air district and, crucially, buy-in from local communities that must first be educated about the benefits. And controlled doesn’t mean risk-free.

“Politically, you have to have the ability to make mistakes and move on,” he said.

Nick Bunch, who plans thinning projects for the Plumas National Forest, pointed to a partly cleared hillside outside of Quincy where one of his extensively planned prescribed burns went awry, undone by a shift in the wind.

“We were about an hour into the burn and the smoke started going into town,” Bunch said, shaking his head at the memory. Even though the burn was going as planned, the smoke was not

acceptable to nearby residents, who protested to fire officials. “Phones started ringing. Calls were made, and we shut it down.”

Another method is used in Florida, which trains and certifies private property owners to burn their overgrown land and provides limited liability coverage in some cases. Florida cleared 2.1 million acres this way last year. Scott Stephens, who heads a wildland fire research lab at UC Berkeley, said the widespread adoption of the policy has educated residents on both its benefits and risks.

Back in Plumas County, a hulking building in a parking lot outside a community health complex may offer the final piece of the forest-health puzzle: creating a market for trees removed from California’s forests.

Part of a project managed by the Sierra Institute for Community and Environment, the unremarkable square structure shows a potential use for California trees. The building is the state’s first to be fully constructed from cross-laminated timber—layers of wood pressed together to make thick sheets and posts—equal to or greater than the strength of steel.

In addition, the $2.3 million facility will house a large boiler to provide heat for the health center by consuming 500 tons of local wood chips a year.

The project is the brainchild of the institute, which envisions it as a way to boost the economies of forest communities. It’s the kind of innovation the governor and Legislature hoped to promote by establishing a Wood Products Working Group to develop commercial uses for the piles of trees beside the state’s roads.

There’s little left in California today of the early 20th century’s timber cutters, sawmills and biomass industry. If the state follows the Little Hoover Commission’s recommendations and accelerates forest thinning, an entire

segment of state industry would need to be rejuvenated.

Meanwhile, officials emphasize the need to educate Californians about the role of forests in the ecosystem.

“If you want people to care about something, they have to understand why it matters,” said Pedro Nava, chairman of the Little Hoover Commission. “They need to understand the deep connection between the health of our state and the state of our forests.”

Branham, of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, said that won’t be easy.

“Some of our messages are counterintuitive: We must cut down healthy living trees to save the forest,” he noted. “It’s a challenge.”

Nevada gas prices hit $3 mark

By Associated Press

Gas prices at Nevada pumps have hit the $3 mark for the first time in 2.5 years.

AAA Nevada reported Monday that the average price for a gallon of regular unleaded gasoline statewide is exactly $3.

Read the whole story

Drug Store Project's message continues to be relevant

By Kathryn Reed

Prevention can save lives, especially when it comes to drug use and school violence.

Once a year sixth-graders on the South Shore participate in the Drug Store Project. Today is that day.

It's one of the few proactive educational pieces left for Lake Tahoe Unified School District students to participate in.

"Regardless of what is out there, it's illegal for them. We are trying to demonstrate the reasons why. Their bodies and brains are growing," Lisa Huard told *Lake Tahoe News.*

This is the 15th year Huard has been organizing the event. It is staged at Lake Tahoe Community College, with hundreds of students going through the same scenario. It's a party, one kid says yes to taking something illicit and it goes bad from there.

The people involved are not actors – they are law enforcement, district attorney's employees, court officials, even a mortician. It take 220 volunteers and 47 agencies to pull it off.

It's powerful.

The unfortunate thing is Drug Store Project is not open to the public because more than just this age group could use this sobering dose of reality.

Huard said the curriculum could easily be taught at younger grade levels. The drug problem is that prevalent at an early age.

New this year will be a component with Greg Bergner, a doctor with Barton Health, who will present a segment about marijuana and the adolescent.

Countless studies have shown how the brain continues to develop until age 26. The effects of marijuana on those younger than 26 can be detrimental. Taking cannabis in any form before then can stunt one's cognitive development. In other words, you won't be as smart as you could be if you use marijuana as a young person.

With medicinal and recreational marijuana now the norm, it makes the message even harder to convey. Kids see older siblings, their parents and other adults partaking in pot and other drugs. They don't understand why it's bad for them.

Alcohol is still a major issue as well for youth.

"There are more children today who do not know how to deal with stressors," Huard said. "They see others self-medicate. This just compounds the problems. We don't have the resources for people, especially in this community."

Huard believes beside just telling kids drugs are bad, it's important to find out why they are using and how they are getting the product. They need to understand why they want to feel whatever change the drug brings them. Then, perhaps, it's possible to get to the root of what led them to consume whatever they are taking.

With more parents using, the message through the years has changed from people who do drugs are bad people to the drugs are bad. This eliminates the conflict of mom and/or dad are bad people because of their habits.

"We need to make it clear to kids that drug usage is bad behavior on people's parts," Huard said. "There needs to be awareness about what goes in their body."

Drug use is known to lead to other bad decisions. There so many consequences, and often they aren't good.

Drug Store Project is about teaching kids that they have choices.

For those who advocate schools should just be about academic learning, Huard said phooey and then some.

"It's been the three R's for the last seven years and look where we are at. There is no consistency in the school district," Huard said.

Rate changes coming for Liberty customers

Liberty Utilities customers will definitely see rates go down starting May 1, but they may also go back up.

The 4.5 percent reduction starting in a month is a result of fuel costs going down.

However, the company that services the California side of the basin, Truckee and Alpine County in March asked the California Public Utilities Commission for a 5.27 percent increase to make up for "undercollected revenues due to the bad weather in January-February 2017 when energy use was down."

The CPUC will determine the final rate increase assuming it is approved.

Residential customers will receive a $29.46 climate credit on their bills in April and October.

Per state regulations, investor-owned utilities like Liberty Utilities must file a general rate case every three years with the CPUC. Liberty last filed one in 2015, with the increase taking effect Jan. 1, 2017. This amounted to a 1 percent for residential and small commercial customers, with larger commercial entities getting about a 16 percent hike in rates.

Liberty officials are still working out the numbers to determine what amount of increase to ask for this year.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Kirkwood tragedy shines spotlight on deadly mountain hazard

By Benjamin Spillman, Reno Gazette-Journal

During the late afternoon hours of March 4 there was no reason to think Olga Perkovic and her son, Aaron, were in any danger.

Perkovic, 50, a lifelong skier, and Aaron, 10, a member of the Kirkwood JETS ski team, had just spent the day doing what they loved at Kirkwood Mountain Resort.

At 4:27pmthey loaded onto the TC Express chairlift to make one last run before skiing back to their condominium to join Olga’s mother, Radmila, 80, and daughter, Sophie, 8, to watch the Academy Awards.

They never arrived.

Read the whole story

Water content improves, but only 52% of average

Three years ago Gov. Jerry Brown found dirt, not snow during the April survey. Photo/LTN file

By Kathryn Reed

March was good, but it wasn't a miracle. That was the conclusion Monday of the snow survey.

While the water content increased dramatically in a one-month period, it is only at 52 percent of average for the state.

The manual measurement that was taken April 2 near Echo Summit recorded a depth of 32.1 inches of snow, 12.4 percent water content, for an average of 49 percent.

A month ago the water content was at 23 percent of average.

The water content is more important than the snow depth because that is what will melt this spring and be consumed by

about one-third of the state's water users downstream. Reservoirs throughout the state are the catch basins for the Sierra runoff, which then is filtered out for municipalities and farmers throughout California throughout the summer.

"The early April snow survey is the most important for water supply forecasting because the snowpack is normally at its peak before it begins to melt with rising spring temperatures," officials with the state Department of Water Resources said.

The good news is that the reservoirs in the state are doing well because of the record rain/snowfall from last winter. Most are still at above average levels despite this winter's dismal rain/snow.

SLTFD back on the waters of Lake Tahoe

Ms. Lisa, the South Lake Tahoe fire boat, will be christened April 2 at 1:30pm at Tahoe Keys Marina. Photo/Provided

By Kathryn Reed

Lives are expected to be saved. Structures might be as well, but the primary purpose of South Lake Tahoe Fire Department's new vessel is to be a rescue boat.

Advanced life support will be able to be administered on the water. In the past only basic first aid was rendered.

The boat is the difference. The old one, which beavers destroyed, was an inflatable. This new one is more stable, larger and will allow IVs to be administered, bleeding to be stopped and splinting among other medical care.

Lakeside Marina is likely to be its permanent home. From there it can reach Emerald Bay in eight minutes.

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board passed an amendment in September 2016 allowing for one public safety pier in each county. South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Jeff Meston is a proponent of this. He would like to see lifts at the piers so boats can stay in the water year round. This will

allow for aid to be rendered that much faster.

“There have been some conversations between TRPA, Tahoe Douglas Fire, and Douglas County sheriff about ideas for a new pier, but no applications submitted at this point,” Tom Lotshaw with the bi-state regulatory agency told *Lake Tahoe News.*

The SLTFD vessel is a SAFE Boat, the same type the Coast Guard uses. It’s near impossible to tip over, and will be able to handle Lake Tahoe when it resembles the ocean.

Infrared gear will allow first responders to find people in the water. Night vision is also a component.

A medic will be on board. The nine fire engineers are being trained in navigation and how to handle the boat. Firefighters are going through training from the state Division of Boating and Waterways as well as the U.S. Coast Guard.

“The boat has played a pretty important role in our delivery system,” Meston told *Lake Tahoe News*. The agency has been without its own boat for three years.

Meston cited how on Fourth of July boaters – motorized and non – get turned around after the fireworks, drownings are an annual occurrence, and freak accidents like tourist vessels getting stuck on sandbars where passengers need rescuing are all calls his team responds to.

This boat also has better firefighting capabilities than the previous one. When a hose was used on the old boat it pushed the vessel away from the flames. This vessel will be strong enough not to move.

This new boat was completely funded with a $390,000 donation by philanthropist Lisa Maloff.

“The reality is this boat will save someone’s life. She will have directly contributed to saving someone’s life,” Meston

said of Maloff.

Maloff is expected to be at today’s christening of the boat named after her – Ms. Lisa – a bit of a play on words with boats often having MS (motor ship) before the name. This was her choosing.