BIG BEAR LAKE >> Fire officials are seeking the public’s help determining how the Holcomb fire started.

“Anyone who may have been in or around the area of the Pacific Crest Trail near Holcomb Valley Road north of Highway 18 or the Doble Trail Camp between 6:00 p.m. on Saturday June 17 and 3:05 p.m. Monday, June 19th, is asked to call 909-382-2699,” U.S. Forest Service officials wrote in a statement.

All calls will remain confidential, officials added.

The fire was reported just after 3 p.m. Monday in that area, northwest of Big Bear Lake, and spread rapidly.

The fire consumed 1,540 acres of timberland by Wednesday evening and is 10 percent contained.

This is a breaking news update. For Wednesday’s full coverage of the Holcomb fire, click here.
UPDATE: Authorities seek public’s help in identifying cause of Holcomb Fire

By Staff Reports
Posted Jun 21, 2017 at 7:45 AM
Updated at 7:46 AM

BIG BEAR — Authorities are asking for the public’s help in establishing the cause of the Holcomb Fire, fire officials announced Wednesday.

The U.S. Forest Service said investigators decided to turn to the public since they’ve been unable to determine what started the blaze, which began Monday afternoon in the San Bernardino Mountains southeast of Lucerne Valley.

U.S. Forest Service fire investigators are urging anyone who may have been in or around the area of the Pacific Crest Trail, near Holcomb Valley Road north of Highway 18, or the Doble Trail Camp between 6 p.m. Saturday and 3:05 p.m. Monday to call 909-382-2699. All calls can remain confidential.

Fire crews managed to hold the Holcomb Fire at 1,200 acres overnight, but the blaze grew to 1,520 acres by Wednesday evening, according to fire officials. Containment remains at 10 percent.

More than 1,000 firefighters have been assigned to help battle the blaze, which was first reported at 3:05 p.m. Monday in the Holcomb Valley area, northeast of Big Bear. There are 66 engines, 24 crews, nine helicopters, four air tankers and six bulldozers assisting.

Emergency personnel from the Big Bear Fire Department, the Big Bear Fire Authority, Cal Fire San Bernardino, San Bernardino National Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the San Bernardino County Fire Department have all responded to the area.
Mandatory evacuations were ordered Tuesday afternoon for homes northeast of Holcomb Valley Road and Highway 18, but they were lifted at 5:50 p.m. Tuesday. Residents, however, were advised to remain on alert “in the event of another wind shift.”

In addition, rolling blackouts have been taking place in the Big Bear Valley area due to the fire, according to the Big Bear Sheriff’s Station, with power expected to be fully restored in the next 24 to 48 hours.

Firefighters have managed to slow the fire’s rate of spread, but the excessive heat has hampered their efforts, according to U.S. Forest Service fire information officer Lee Beyer.

The Doble Trail and Tanglewood Group campgrounds remain closed, according to officials, along with the Pacific Crest Trail west of Highway 18, to Van Dusen Road, in the fire area.

The Sheriff’s Department announced that Holcomb Valley Road was closed from Highway 18 northwest to the end of the road. Highway 18 from Delta Avenue to the Mitsubishi Cement Plant, south of Lucerne Valley, was also closed, officials said. Highway 18 has been reopened between Paradise Road and Baldwin Lake Road.

The duration of the closures remains unknown, with Beyer mentioning the road could remain closed for “a few more days.”

The Mojave Desert Air Quality Management District (MDAQMD) issued a smoke advisory for the High Desert region on Monday evening due to smoke from the blaze moving toward the region.

Air quality may reach unhealthy levels due to the smoke, and residents were urged to avoid any vigorous outdoor or indoor exertion and take other precautions. The advisory will remain in effect until further notice, MDAQMD said.

Information will be updated on the Holcomb Fire on the Inciweb website at inciweb.nwcg.gov/incident/5256/.
Southern California firefighters pull in a quarter-million dollars in overtime, and then some

Except for a Vallejo firefighter who got a $2 million payout for wrongful termination, the list of California's highest-earning public employees for 2016 is dominated by medical personnel – surgeons, physicians, psychiatrists, hospital directors – and a few investment officers from CalPERS, the world's largest public employee retirement system.

The top paid folk from that world, not including benefits, ranged from $591,653 to $1 million, according to the most recent data from Transparent California, a nonprofit that would like a reboot of public employee benefits.

But some first responders did pretty well, too, according to the data. Michael Rubino, chief port pilot II in Los Angeles, topped the state among first responders, with pay of $582,734. Patricia Knudson, chief deputy sheriff in Riverside, was second, with pay of $505,520.

Then there are dozens of public workers who more than doubled their pay with huge amounts of overtime – overwhelmingly firefighters in departments from Los Angeles to Oakland, San Jose to Orange County.

None of the figures cited here include benefits. Consider:

- The biggest overtime earner was Charles F. Ferrari, Los Angeles fire captain II, with a base salary of $123,025 and overtime pay of $334,655. Ferrari’s total pay was $469,198, according to the data.

- On his heels were Los Angeles Fire Captain James P. Viach, with total pay of $483,730; and Los Angeles firefighter Donn D. Thompson, at $424,913.

OCFA must grapple alone with expensive, unfunded pension liabilities that plunge its balance sheet into the red, while entities like the Los Angeles Fire Department are cushioned by a large city government. (File photo by Bruce Chambers, Orange County Register/CNG)
Southern California firefighters pull in a quarter-million dollars in overtime, and then some – Orange County Register

- Riverside Utilities Electric Power System Dispatcher Donald Dahle had a base salary of $110,145, and overtime of $257,720. His total pay was $373,235.
- Orange County Fire Authority Captain Gregory Bradshaw had base pay of $116,846, and overtime of $245,350. His total pay was $412,689.

Transparent California collects and publishes the same public pay data that the state controller's office does, but includes names.

The average fire captain for the Orange County Fire Authority earned $301,791 in total compensation – pay and benefits – last year. That was the highest in the state and perhaps the nation, said Robert Fellner, research director for Transparent California.

Overtime is the vehicle that allows that to happen – and it's an issue that agencies have been grappling with for years, and largely failing to tame.

In many public safety agencies statewide, police and firefighters can boost their overtime pay by counting vacation hours as time worked – a lucrative perk that costs taxpayers millions, some elected official have said.

Officials at the Orange County Sheriff's Department branded this a "disconcerting trick," and deputies gave it up in 2008.

"In this practice, an employee working large amounts of overtime consistently takes a day off per pay period," said an audit. "This practice allows the employee to receive paid time off ... and then work more days of overtime at other points during the week, still earning more than he/she would if he/she had just worked a straight schedule."

The perk is common and has been enjoyed by firefighters with the Los Angeles Fire Department and public safety workers with the California Highway Patrol, the California Department of Forestry and Fire, as well as those with the cities of Riverside, Long Beach, Anaheim, Santa Ana, Huntington Beach, Irvine and many others.

In 2014, Orange County Fire Authority firefighters joined Sheriff's deputies in giving up the perk as part of a new contract. It was supposed to save $1.7 million in overtime costs.

That hasn't panned out. Overtime at OCFA ran $46.1 million last year, up from $39.2 million in 2014.

Though proponents in Orange County and elsewhere say the overtime rules actually help save money, others disagree.

"It's crazy," said Fellner of Transparent California. "They really need to get to the root of the problem. They've been talking about it for years, but things haven't changed. They need to get serious and implement an overtime cap that actually caps overtime."

Los Angeles Fire Department spokesman Peter Sanders the perk is still in place at his agency, and it hasn't been an issue in recent contract negotiations.

Both OCFA and the LAFD are leaning on overtime because so many employees are retiring at a time when new recruits aren't ready.

Filling shifts via overtime is less expensive than hiring new public safety workers, who have very expensive benefits, officials said.

"Retirement is our issue," said Dave Spencer, a spokesman and battalion chief for the Orange County Fire Authority. "Many agencies are struggling to keep up with attrition."

The Fire Authority's annual analysis of overtime usage, completed in March, found that an extraordinary fire season, open positions and vacancies due to promotion and retirements forced many employees with specialty skills to work overtime.

The OCFA has been "aggressively...conducting academies to help reduce the impact to the employee and distribution of overtime," the analysis said. "OCFA staff is also working with the Orange County Professional Firefighters Association to enhance the existing policies to reduce the amount of forced overtime. The current policy is to allow employees to voluntarily work up to 120 continuous hours, subject to the Battalion Chief's approval. OCFA staff will continue to reduce the consecutive hour rule back to 96, when our vacancies are filled and the need to force employees to work shifts are minimized."

Paying overtime is nearly 28 percent more cost-effective than hiring a full time benefited employee, OCFA's analysis said – and it saved the agency $15.6 million last year.

The story is much the same in Los Angeles.

"Yes, as a general rule, filling shifts via overtime is actually more cost effective than hiring AND allows us to keep all of our resources (fire engines and ambulances) staffed and open 24/7, without compromising public safety," said LAFD spokesman Sanders by email.

"However, our situation is unique (and significantly compounded) by the fact that we hired no new firefighters between 2009 and mid-2014.

"That five-year hiring freeze saw us lose hundreds of positions due to retirements and attrition that we were unable to fill. In order to keep all of our resources open even day we were required to pay overtime. Members were required to also work at least one or two shifts a month on a mandatory basis to keep fire and (emergency medical) resources open. Since we began recruiting and hiring again, we have managed to close the gap with every new class of firefighters that hits the field. We expect that gap to continue closing as we keep hiring new firefighters and have already seen a big drop in the amount of required and voluntary overtime.
Southern California firefighters pull in a quarter-million dollars in overtime, and then some – Orange County Register

“However, we will always need to pay some overtime due to shifts needed (as) coverage for sickness, vacation, injuries etc.,” Sanders said.

The financial picture is complicated for the Orange County Fire Authority, a public safety agency that stands on its own as a separate, independent government. That means it must grapple with expensive, unfunded pension liabilities that plunge its balance sheet into the red, while entities like the Los Angeles Fire Department are cushioned by a large city government and its many non-public-safety workers, who have less expensive benefits.

The red ink at the Orange County Fire Authority shrank nearly 5 percent last year, to $160.7 million. The Fire Authority is aggressively paying down its unfunded pension liabilities to the tune of $50 million to $60 million a year, said Lori Zeller, assistant chief of business services.

In related analyses, Transparent California found that overtime pay was up 19 percent in Anaheim; 18.5 percent in Buena Park; 17 percent in Irvine and Costa Mesa; and 14 percent in Fullerton.

Tags: fire, public safety, Top Stories OCR

[Watch] Full Episode Madness: Andrea Savage Gets Real on ‘I’m Sorry’

By truTV

Hilarious Andrea Savage and cast show us how awkwardly funny life can be.

Teri Sforza

Sforza birthed the OC Watchdog column aiming to keep a critical (but good-humored) eye on governments and nonprofits, large and small. It won first place for public service reporting from the California Newspaper Publishers Association in 2010. Sforza contributed to the OCR’s Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation of fertility fraud at UC Irvine, covered what was then the largest municipal bankruptcy in America’s history, and is the author of “The Strangest Song,” the first book to tell the story of a genetic condition called Williams syndrome and the extraordinary musicality of many of the people who have it. She earned her M.F.A. from UCLA’s School of Theater, Film and Television, and enjoys making documentaries, including the OCR’s first: “The Boy Monk,” a story that was also told as a series in print.

Watchdogs need help: Point us to documents that can help tell stories that need to be told, and we’ll do the rest.

Follow Teri Sforza @terisforza

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Pete Aguilar’s bill related to the San Bernardino terror attack passed the House

In this December 2015 file photo, law enforcement personnel run toward a shootout with assailants who killed 14 and wounded 22 in a terror attack in San Bernardino earlier in the day. The House of Representatives this week passed a bill from Rep. Pete Aguilar, D-Redlands, that would require federal agencies to submit a report to Congress following an act of terror on U.S. soil.

By JEFF HORSEMAN | jhorseman@scng.com | The Press-Enterprise
PUBLISHED: June 21, 2017 at 10:27 am | UPDATED: June 21, 2017 at 10:42 am

A bill sponsored by Rep. Pete Aguilar, D-Redlands, to tighten reporting requirements in the wake of a terrorist act passed the House on Tuesday, June 20 by a voice vote.
The Reporting Efficiently to Proper Officials in Response to Terrorism, or REPORT Act, requires the homeland security secretary, in partnership with the FBI, attorney general and the National Counterterrorism Center, to submit a report to Congress after a terrorist attack on U.S. soil.

Aguilar represents San Bernardino, where a 2015 terror attack killed 14 and wounded 22. He introduced the bill after that attack.

“In the days and weeks after (the attack), we pledged to do all we could to prevent another attack like this from ever happening again, and that is what this bill will help us do,” Aguilar said in a speech on the House floor. “The REPORT Act is a common-sense bill that will empower lawmakers with the facts they need to create meaningful laws to thwart future acts of terror.

“This bill is for the 14 killed and 22 injured in San Bernardino. It is for my community. It is also for every American city touched by these heinous acts of terrorism. We can and we must work together to protect our homeland, and I believe this is a smart, bipartisan step to achieve just that.”

The bill now heads to the Senate for approval.
EVWD goes green for power

By Charles Roberts | Posted: Wednesday, June 21, 2017 3:04 pm

Hydroelectric generation for the East Valley Water District (EVWD) water treatment plant is 95 percent complete, and its partner agency, the San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District (Valley District) has approve an additional $45,000 to Yirish up.

Meeting on Tuesday, June 20, the Valley District Board of Directors approved the additional expenditure.

The project takes water from the state water project, using the fall from Lake Silverwood to create all the pressure needed to operate the generator, so there is no pumping cost.

The $2.6 million cost is being fronted by Valley District on a 10 year loan to EVWD,

The Valley District Board also approved a $125,000 public relations project to educate and convince EVWD customers that the proposed Sterling Natural Resources Center wastewater treatment plant is a good idea.

The proposed plant would divorce EVWD from the San Bernardino treatment plant and use the $8 million a year being paid to San Bernardino to build and operate the state of the art plant at Del Rosa Drive and Sixth Street in Highland.
How California’s last big steel mill plans to go green

By Neil Nisperos, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

Wednesday, June 21, 2017

RANCHO CUCAMONGA >> The Gerdau Steel Mill in Rancho Cucamonga, the last full-production steel mill in California, aims to turn a traditionally dirty business into being nearly emission-free.

The company on Wednesday celebrated the groundbreaking for an emissions-cleaning building, which also coincided with the plant’s 60th anniversary. It opened in 1957 as the Etiwanda Steel Producers company.

“I think she looks pretty good for being 60 years old,” Mark Olsen, vice president and general manager of the Gerdau Steel Mill, said in his opening remarks to guests. “But don’t tell anybody. She’s going to be getting some work done.”

The $22 million facility, which is expected to be completed in the first quarter of 2018, will be built alongside the mill at 12459 Arrow Route by the SMS Group, whose executives traveled from their base in Italy to attend the ceremony.

When completed, Gerdau’s plant will prevent 99.9 percent of emissions, which include lead and chromium, from escaping into the environment.

“I think its a huge steppingstone for the industry, and it’s something very vital in America to be able to produce steel, and I’m really glad to be part of it,” Bryan O’Malley, a supervisor at the mill, said after the ceremony. “We learn everyday that you’re always improving your processes and that’s what it’s all about.”

Current filtration at the plant already captures 99.4 percent of the mill’s emissions, officials said.

The new building is called a “bag house,” Olsen said by phone prior to the event. “It’s like a large vacuum cleaner … that sucks all the particulates formed during the melting process into a bag house and through a series of filters.”

The Gerdau mill, which employs about 275 workers, is also the state’s largest metal recycler. The mill annually takes in 440,000 tons of scrap metal for the production of about 400,000 tons of seismic rebar, used for major road and building construction across California. Recent projects include the Devore freeway interchange project, the towering Wilshire Grand building in Los Angeles and Levi’s Stadium in Santa Clara.

The mill is also known as the place many police agencies throughout Southern California send weapons they confiscated to be melted.

“We’re always looking for opportunities in construction, so if it made sense, we would like to grow our business,” Olsen said by phone. “This year, we took in 440,000 tons, and next year we hope to take in 500,000 tons.”
Speakers Wednesday morning included California Assemblyman Marc Steinorth, R-Rancho Cucamonga, and San Bernardino County Supervisor Janice Rutherford, who is also a board member of the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

“I can’t wait to say here in the second (county) district, we have the cleanest, greenest steel mill in the country,” Rutherford said.

Echoing Rutherford, Steinorth said: “I am thrilled that you have the cleanest steel mill in the state of California, soon the entire country and hopefully, the world.”

The ceremony also honored longtime workers, including Jessie Vasquez, a mechanic who recently celebrated his 50th anniversary as a mill employee.

“I’ve seen a lot come and go with different managers and different change-ups,” said Vasquez, who added that he’s never felt the need to leave the company.

Vasquez said he was happy for the last fully operational steel mill in California to “stay home, or everything will be out of here.”


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Heat, failed air condition close Barstow courthouse

By Brian Rokos, The Press-Enterprise

Wednesday, June 21, 2017

San Bernardino County’s presiding judge ordered that the Barstow courthouse be closed Thursday, June 22, and Friday, June 23, because the air conditioning has failed.

The order, announced Wednesday by Judge Raymond L. Haight III, noted the excessive heat in Southern California.

All cases scheduled to be heard Thursday and Friday will instead be heard in Victorville on their originally scheduled day.

The Barstow courthouse is expected to resume normal operations Monday, Haight wrote.
Homebuyers beware — Inland Southern California is a tough market for you — and each month it's getting tougher.

May numbers from CoreLogic reveal that median prices have risen year over year in Riverside County ($330,000 to $356,000) and San Bernardino County ($285,000 to $310,000). These are within a few points of all-time highs.

Moreover, notes Andrew LePage, CoreLogic research analyst, "the nearly half-a-percentage-point rise in mortgage interest rates over that period means the principal and interest payment for that median-priced home has risen more than 12 percent."

Sales of newly-built homes are about 43 percent below the long-term average, CoreLogic reported, meaning most of the 6,467 homes sold in May were resales.
And note, one in 5 of the homes being sold in the Inland area is being bought by an absentee buyer, a group LePage said is made up of mostly investors and some vacation homebuyers. Investor purchases likely are being turned into rentals. In recent months, rental prices in the Inland area have also increased sharply.

Scott Beloian of Westcoe Realtors says the CoreLogic numbers square with his recent experiences in the real estate market.

New home sales are off, Beloian said, “because the cost to build is too high. That's what makes the current market different from the one before, during the boom, when the cost to build was less. You saw construction on every corner. Now you see it, but not nearly as much.”

These factors affect affordability, which has become a bigger problem each month since the housing market began recovering from the calamitous crash of a decade ago. Mortgage payments have been eating up an ever-larger share of disposable income.

Let's say you can afford a 5-percent down payment of $17,800. A $356,000 home bought with a 30-year mortgage at 3.67 percent interest would cost the buyer $2,153 a month. A $330,000 home would cost $1,872 a month. These figures are from an online calculator offered by Trulia.

The median household income in the Inland area is $56,615, according to Onboard Infomatics. Homebuyers, then, would spend about half their income on housing.

“Overall I’d say affordability is already a factor — and it's going to be a factor,” Beloian said. “There’s going to need to be some kind of correction to balance these things out. Something's going to have to give.”
The chief investigator in the San Bernardino County Colonies corruption case testified under defense cross-examination Wednesday that he had heard of the principals in the case in connection with possible bribery months earlier than he previously claimed.

The revelation came during a wide-ranging day of cross-examination in the six-month-old trial that also showed:

• There were no clear-cut reasons to begin inquiries about Colonies Partners and corruption during the summer of 2008, when investigators began asking about it.

• Investigators had information that discredited Supervisor Josie Gonzales’ claim that two Colonies Partners principals tried to lobby her during a trip to China in 2006.

• There were no efforts to test the sobriety of former county Assessor Bill Postmus, an admitted methamphetamine addict, after he entered into a March 2011 plea agreement with prosecutors to turn state’s evidence in the case.

Hollis “Bud” Randles, a senior investigator for the San Bernardino County District Attorney’s Office, had testified before a 2011 grand jury and again in the current trial before Judge Michael A. Smith that it was not until Nov. 1, 2008, that the District Attorney’s Office began investigating possible corruption involving the $102 million settlement between the county and Rancho Cucamonga land investor group Colonies Partners LP on Nov. 28, 2006.

Nov. 1, 2008, was the day former Assistant Assessor Adam Aleman began talking to investigators about corruption in then-Assessor Postmus’ office. Aleman, charged in the assessor corruption case and facing eight years in prison, had begun cooperating in hopes of reducing his sentence.

Attorney Stephen Larson, representing defendant Jeff Burum, a Colonies Partners co-managing partner, showed there was a record that Randles had heard of Burum and Colonies as early as July and August of 2008, when he inquired about Burum and the Colonies settlement in interviews with two former Assessor’s Office employees.

“You told that grand jury in 2011 that before Nov. 1, 2008, you did not know who Jeff Burum was, correct?” Larson said after reviewing with Randles the transcripts of those interviews.

“That’s what I said, yes,” Randles answered. He said he was only aware of Burum by name, and that Burum was associated with Colonies Partners.
In Randles’ August 2008 interview with former Assessor’s Office employee Bob Smith, Randles asked Smith about Postmus’ decision to pay “this exorbitant amount,” referring to the $102 million Colonies settlement. He told Smith the investigators were “elephant hunters.”

When asked by Larson what that meant, Randles said they like to go after “big game.” Randles told Larson they were investigating Postmus for taking bribes from “developers,” not just Burum,

“The information that had come to me was that Mr. Postmus was taking bribes from developers,” Randles said.

Randles later told defense attorney Rajan Maline that an anonymous WeTip complaint prompted the inquiry into Burum and the Colonies settlement, although the complaint was not about Burum or Colonies Partners. He said the anonymous person launching the complaint alleged Postmus was taking bribes from developers, and mentioned one developer by name, but it was not Burum.

“So you decided you wanted to throw Mr. Burum into the mix,” asked Maline, who represents defendant Jim Erwin.

Randles said the subject of Colonies may have come up in interviews with other people, but not in the context of bribes or political action committees, and that there had been talk about the Colonies settlement being the biggest settlement in county history. He also noted news articles about the Colonies litigation and settlement.

Prosecutors allege three county officials took $100,000 bribes, which were reported as campaign contributions, from Burum to gain approval for the $102 million court settlement over flood control work at Colonies Partners’ 434-acre residential and commercial development in Upland. The prosecution’s case has depended primarily on circumstantial evidence and the testimony of Postmus and Aleman, who struck plea bargains and agreed to cooperate in the criminal investigation to avoid harsher sentences.

Defendants include Burum, former Assistant Assessor Erwin, former county Supervisor Paul Biane, and Mark Kirk, the chief of staff for former Supervisor Gary Ovitt. All have denied any wrongdoing, and maintain the $100,000 PAC contributions from Colonies Partners were publicly reported and merely a good-faith gesture to mend fences after years of heated legal battle.

Larson also asked Randles about a note Aleman told investigators he had found on his doorstep early on in the investigation that read, in all-capital letters, “HAVE A NICE LIFE CI (RAT)” — “CI” standing for “confidential informant.”

Randles said the note was tested several times for fingerprints, as late as Jan. 4, the day trial started. But the only fingerprints found on the note were Aleman’s, Randles said.

Larson noted Aleman’s conviction for falsifying and destroying evidence in the Assessor’s Office corruption case.

“So it never crossed your mind that maybe Mr. Aleman had put this document together to obstruct an investigation or submit false claims? That thought didn’t cross your mind?” Larson asked Randles.

Randles said that theory was considered, but there was no evidence to prove it.

In other testimony, Randles agreed with Larson that Gonzales’ account of encountering Burum in China during a November 2006 trade mission, where Burum and his hired consultant, Jim Brulte, tried to lobby her, did not hold water. Burum’s credit card statement, which investigators had, showed charges in Palm Springs and Rancho Cucamonga coinciding with the dates of the China trip.
Pity the relocated male desert tortoises. Once they are airlifted or driven to new homes in the Mojave Desert, they fail to mate and produce offspring, a study has found.

Though scientists aren't ready to draw conclusions, the finding raises concern that moving tortoises may diminish the genetic diversity of the species, which is listed as threatened with extinction.

At a cost of millions of dollars, desert tortoises have been repeatedly moved out of their home ranges when their habitats were needed for military base expansions, solar energy development and other projects. Just this spring, the military moved more than a thousand desert tortoises out of the Johnson Valley expansion area of the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms.

The study, published in the journal Biological Conservation, focused on the reproductive viability of about 570 desert tortoises that the U.S. Army moved in 2008 from a 23,200-acre Fort Irwin expansion area. The study was funded by the U.S. Department of Defense.
Since female tortoises can store live sperm in their bodies for as long as two years after mating, the researchers waited four years to see how well the relocated tortoises were doing in their ability to reproduce.

They went to the relocation area about twenty miles northeast of Barstow between Fort Irwin and Interstate 15 and took blood samples from 92 hatchlings. They analyzed the animals’ DNA and then compared the results with DNA data previously gathered from adult tortoises in the area.

This allowed them to identify the parents of 35 of the hatchlings, and not one was a relocated male.

“This was unexpected,” said Rob Fleischer, a co-author of the study and the head of the evolutionary genetics center at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute in Washington, D.C.

“The translocated females do appear to be reproducing,” he said by telephone. “So there is not a complete loss, but it does reduce the gene pool.”

Good genetic health is important to all species, especially those in decline. The better the genetic health, the more like a species can stave off disease and adapt to change.

Tracking the tortoises with radio transmitters showed relocated males were close enough to females to mate, but apparently, they could not compete with the males that were already living in an area, Fleischer said.

Relocated male tortoises may be more susceptible to the stress of moving to an unfamiliar area and finding food, water and shelter, the study’s authors wrote.

They also may not be as fit as the resident tortoises because of “the energy expended during the integration into a new environment,” the paper said. “This is especially true if there is already a sizable resident population to compete with for resources.”

Kristin Berry, a Riverside-based biologist and tortoise expert for the U.S. Geological Survey, said the findings are concerning because they suggest relocation efforts are potentially reducing genetic diversity at a time when the tortoise population in the western Mojave Desert is at an all-time low.

“It is very important in terms of understanding translocations,” she said.

A recent U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service report found that tortoise populations in the area have declined as much as 51 percent between 2004 and 2014, she pointed out.

David Lamfrom, the California desert manager for the National Parks Conservation Association, said the study’s finding was troublesome and fascinating.
“It may speak to the impact stress (from being relocated) may have on the reproductive biology of the desert tortoise,” said Lamfrom, a wildlife biologist.

He said that follow-up studies are needed to see whether the relocated males have more reproductive success in the future. Tortoises can live as long as 80 years.

The relocated tortoise may be relegated to more marginal habitat, he said.

“The stresses associated with displacement may be more severe than we understood,” he said.

David Danelski

David Danelski is an investigative and environmental reporter for The Press-Enterprise newspaper in Riverside, California. He has been with the newspaper since 1990 and has previously covered crime, transportation and city government. He is married to Lorrie Cobain, a teacher and staff development specialist for the Riverside Unified School District. The couple has one adult daughter, Rosemary, who lives in New York City.

Follow David Danelski @DavidDanelski

[Watch] The Truth About Cigarette Butts
By Tobacco Free CA

Cigarettes aren’t just dangerous when they’re smoked. Millions of discarded cigarette butts are causing harm to the...

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If you see comments that you find offensive, please use the “Flag as Inappropriate” feature by hovering over the right side of the post, and pulling down on the arrow that appears. Or, contact our editors by emailing moderator@scng.com.
YUCCA VALLEY TOWN COUNCIL BANS COMMERCIAL MARIJUANA IN TOWN LIMITS

By Z107.7 News, on June 21st, 2017

At last night’s meeting of the Yucca Valley Town Council, the council heard from dozens of people who were nearly unanimous in their support of a town ordinance prohibiting commercial marijuana businesses in the town. Managing editor Tami Roleff says council members voted to approve the new ordinance...

"Medical marijuana comes in many forms: oils, salves, ingested pills.... It's a miracle drug when it comes to reducing pain. Recreational [marijuana] is something different, and as long as you do it at home and to want to be high, great, that's great, but using it in public is something that's very disturbing.”

Council member Bob Leone became very emotional as he talked about the benefits of medical marijuana, but as he and many others pointed out, that was not the issue at last night’s meeting of the Yucca Valley Town Council.

Even Jason Elsaesser, who once ran a medical marijuana dispensary in the town, and was behind Measure X, to allow two medical marijuana dispensaries in town limits, spoke in favor of the ordinance that would prohibit commercial uses of recreational marijuana.

"I am in favor of keeping ordinance as it is. If I lived in a nice neighborhood and someone started growing next to me, and I had to smell marijuana when I was having dinner with my family, I wouldn't be that happy about it.”

And council member Robert Lombardo said marijuana laws were certain to change.

"There's too much uncertainty in the state and federal laws. I think that this is definitely not the time to be considering to make pot shops in town.”

The council tweaked the title of the ordinance, changing "prohibiting” personal marijuana uses to "regulating” it, because residents can still grow up to six plants in their home, assuming they apply for a permit to do so. When town staff was questioned on the need for a permit, council members were told a permit would give law enforcement and code enforcement teeth to enforce the ordinance.
The Riverside County Sheriff’s Department needs $50 million beyond what’s in the next county budget or major cuts, including closing patrol stations and jails, will have to be considered, Sheriff Stan Sniff warned this week.

“I cannot operate 24/7 operations and maintain this level of cuts,” Sniff told the county Board of Supervisors during a Monday, June 19, budget hearing. “We gave ground, as I said, this year and reduced staffing wherever we could.”
"But the only place else we can go to is what jail facilities, what sheriff’s stations that are running 24/7, that require X amount of manpower to stay afloat. The county will be at bare bones. There is no fluff there."

Sniff said his department bridged a $40 million shortfall in the current budget by not replacing hundreds of departed employees, disbanding a narcotics unit and a cold case homicide team and cutting patrols in unincorporated communities to the bare minimum.

As an elected official who can’t be fired, Sniff has wide latitude to run his department as he sees fit.

County finance chief Paul McDonnell recommended giving the sheriff $10 million for now and waiting to see if ongoing cost-cutting efforts bear fruit.

The county is spending more than $20 million on consulting firm KPMG to make county government more efficient and data-driven. Supervisors hope the savings produced by KPMG can rein in public safety costs without cutting service.

Supervisors on Tuesday gave preliminary approval to the $5.5 billion budget for the fiscal year beginning July 1. The $10 million for Sniff, along with $12 million in extra money for other departments, will be considered July 25.
McDonnell also recommended extra money for the district attorney – roughly $4.1 million – and public defender – $2.3 million. Because they are part of a KPMG experiment to save money on staffing, both agencies are exempt from a 6.5 percent across-the-board cut to all departments.

“Without this exemption, we would be devastated and we simply could not carry out our constitutionally mandated core services,” Public Defender Steve Harmon told the board.

For years, the county has struggled to make ends meet as revenue fails to keep up with a mounting series of new, ongoing and inflexible costs, including guaranteed pay raises and a lawsuit settlement requiring the county to spend more on jail inmates’ health care.

It’s a vexing challenge for supervisors who have long sought a sustainable budget that leaves savings untouched. Key goals are to keep reserves from falling below $150 million and to reach a balanced budget as soon as possible.

Officials with the county executive office, which handles day-to-day affairs, have focused on public safety spending, which they say consumes roughly three-fourths of the county’s discretionary dollars. There’s nothing left to cut from non-public safety agencies, officials said.

As in past years, a number of departments, including the sheriff, district attorney and public defender, start the new budget cycle with projected shortfalls, which typically shrink over time as costs are cut and previously unbudgeted money comes in.

In the budget for this fiscal year, which ends June 30, the Sheriff’s Department started with a roughly $40 million shortfall. “It was almost like a ship hitting an iceberg,” Sniff said.

That shortfall is now gone. Sniff said his department, which employs almost 4,000, *erased the gap in part through attrition*, with a net loss of 228 employees, including 136 sworn law enforcement personnel, as of May.

To further plug the shortfall, staffing for a gang task force was cut in half, a southwest county narcotics task force was disbanded and the department suspended a Secret Service partnership for an Inland financial crimes team, Sniff said.

Positions needed to comply with the lawsuit settlement and staff the John J. Benoit Detention Center in Indio, which opens next year, have not been filled, and overtime is needed to keep the jails running, the sheriff added.

About 374,000 of the county’s 2.3 million residents live in unincorporated areas, which rely on the county for police protection. In those communities, the ratio of deputies per 1,000 residents is going from 1.04 per 1,000 in July 2016 to 0.75 per 1,000 by the end of this summer, leaving two deputies on duty for hundreds of square miles, Sniff said.

“In essence, what I’m telling you is we’re down to the nubs,” he said.

If the $50 million gap in the new budget stands, Sniff indicated he’ll have to look at disbanding an off-road vehicle enforcement team and losing up to 250 sworn positions through attrition. The sheriff did not respond to a request for comment about how seriously he’ll have to consider closing jails and stations.

This month, a pilot experiment started at the Hemet sheriff’s station to implement some of KPMG’s ideas. By changing how deputies are scheduled and letting non-deputized personnel handle minor calls, the firm believes the sheriff can save millions.

McDonnell, the county finance officer, said supervisors should wait to see what efficiencies KPMG can deliver before giving the sheriff more money.

“...and so when we run these pilot programs and I hear the sheriff say ‘We think they can work, but you know, I don’t know,’ it’s his ego getting in the way,” Tavaglione said. “But I know him well enough to know he can put that ego aside and become the real leader that I know he can be.”
Minding the gap

Riverside County Sheriff Stan Sniff said he needs more money to maintain existing operations.

$307 million – What Sniff is asking for.

$257 million – What he said he’s getting in county funds.

$10 million – The extra money the county’s top finance officer recommends giving Sniff for the time being.

Tags:  Echo Code,  public safety,  Top Stories PE

Jeff Horseman

Jeff Horsemann got into journalism because he liked to write and stunk at math. He grew up in Vermont and he honed his interviewing skills as a supermarket cashier by asking Bernie Sanders “Paper or plastic?” After graduating from Syracuse University in 1999, Jeff began his journalistic odyssey at The Watertown Daily Times in upstate New York, where he impressed then-U.S. Senate candidate Hillary Clinton so much she called him “John” at the end of an interview. From there, he went to Annapolis, Maryland, where he covered city, county and state government at The Capital newspaper before love and the quest for snowless winters took him in 2007 to Southern California, where he started out covering Temecula for The Press-Enterprise. Today, Jeff writes about Riverside County government and regional politics. Along the way, Jeff has covered wildfires, a tropical storm, 9/11 and the Dec. 2 terror attack in San Bernardino. If you have a question or story idea about politics or the inner workings of government, please let Jeff know. He’ll do his best to answer, even if it involves a little math.

Follow Jeff Horseman @JeffHorseman

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After five long years that brought major changes to San Bernardino, the struggling city is officially out of bankruptcy.

The city’s plan for emerging from bankruptcy — which was approved earlier this year by U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Meredith Jury — became effective June 15, officials said this week. The city, facing a $45-million budget shortfall, had declared bankruptcy in August 2012.

In the years-long process since, San Bernardino has seen its fire department and other services outsourced, its staff cut by hundreds and its public services neglected. Meanwhile, it has struggled to cope with increased violence that officials have attributed in part to an under-resourced police department.

Here are some things to know about the end of the bankruptcy process, what it means for the city and what might be next.

1. **Now that it is out of bankruptcy, San Bernardino must begin paying its creditors**

The city’s plan of adjustment became effective June 15. That means the city can begin paying its creditors under the terms outlined in that plan, which was negotiated over several years.

Its details have been known for some time.

Most significantly, the plan preserves pension benefits for employees and retirees, though employees will have to contribute more to their pension plans, benefits were modified for new employees and retirees will lose some health benefits they were promised.
Some bondholders and unsecured creditors will be paid only 1% of what they were owed.

2. The city's budget woes are far from over

In a memorandum on the city’s most recent proposed budget, City Manager Mark Scott put it this way: “While the city’s momentum has improved significantly, it would be overly optimistic to suggest that decades of decline can be reversed overnight.”

The bankruptcy plan, Scott noted, “is very realistic in showing only modest budgetary growth” over a 20-year period.

The city’s poverty rate is high — about 33% of its residents live in poverty — and its average household income is low, making it difficult for San Bernardino to generate the revenue it needs to pay for years of backlogged services.

But city officials say they are slowly making progress toward some of their goals.
The City Council is expected to approve a $160-million operating budget for the coming fiscal year at its meeting Wednesday evening, along with a $22.6-million capital improvement budget, which will help with street repairs, city park improvements and other much-needed projects.

The operating budget also allows for some additional staff in various departments.

Sandra Hall of San Bernardino marches with about 200 community members in a Peace Walk to honor the victims of homicides and call for an end to gun violence on May 19, 2016, in San Bernardino. (Gina Ferazzi / Los Angeles Times)

3. With the end of bankruptcy, San Bernardino is hoping to rebuild its police department and address its struggles with violence

San Bernardino has long been affected by high levels of violence, and last year it recorded its worst homicide rate in decades. So officials have focused on boosting the police department, which saw significant staffing cuts in recent years.

Under the city’s proposed budget, about $76 million has been dedicated to funding the department — up from about $70 million last year.
“We’re gearing up to have a police department that’s better resourced,” Scott said in an interview Wednesday.

The city is in the process of replacing about one-quarter of an aging fleet of police vehicles, Scott said. And it is hoping to fill a large number of vacant officer positions — but that is no easy goal, given the time and resources it takes to recruit and train new police officers.

The department’s resources have been boosted by a number of grants, including a federal grant announced late last year to offset the cost of hiring 11 officers.

The city is also in the process of implementing a new violence reduction program, and officials are in the late stages of recruiting someone to administer it, Scott said.

### 4. City officials are hoping the end of bankruptcy prompts people to take a second look at San Bernardino

City officials would like people outside the city to see its potential rather than its troubles. They tout the the fact that it is home to Cal State San Bernardino and San Bernardino Valley Community College, its relatively low-cost housing and lower costs of doing business.

As the city’s proposed budget this year stated:

“Opportunities for first-time home buyers, entrepreneurs, investors and employers are vast; one only needs to see the potential.”

But bankruptcy has cast a cloud over many of the city’s aspirations. Now that it’s lifted, officials are hoping outsiders will take a new look at the city.

“The thing I’ve run into is that people have not understood how they are going to do business with a city in bankruptcy,” Scott said. They ask, “‘Will you keep your staff? Will you be able to follow through on your obligations?’”

“Now,” he said, “we’re able to say to people, ‘We’re like any other city.’”
He added: “It’s time for us to show off that we can be a reliable place to do business.... It’s up to us now to perform.”

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paloma.esquivel@latimes.com

Twitter: @palomaesquivel

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Chapman University's semi-annual economic forecast hit some sour notes with its projection for 2017 looking like the overall slowest year since the Great Recession.

With the economic rebound in its eighth year, the business climate — especially in Orange County — is losing much of its oomph, said Chapman's report released Wednesday, June 21.

"Prospects dim. Even more than California's" reads the chapter title on the local economy.

Here are six Orange County themes in the forecast:

(1) Modest job growth

The post-recession hiring spree will cool with a projected Orange County employment growth of 1.5 percent this year. That's down from 2.3 percent in 2016 and would be the slowest pace since the recovery began. Key culprits? A lack of workers to hire and a possible end to the building boom.
(2) Decent income boost

Countywide income is projected to grow by 4.5 percent this year vs. 4.3 percent in 2016. That added cash allows local spending, as measured by taxable sales, to grow by 4.5 percent this year vs. 4.3 percent in 2016. That extra shopping won't help local retailers, though, as their employment will fall 0.1 percent in 2017.

(3) Pricier homes

Chapman has been concerned since late last year that Orange County pricing has exceeded underlying fundamentals. Yet, a very limited supply of homes to buy is projected to push up prices 6.2 percent this year — the highest since 2013.

(4) Construction cools

The post-recession building boom won't be much of an economic driver. Building permits in dollars will grow by 4.5 percent this year vs. 10.1 percent in 2016. As a result, Orange County construction bosses will increase staffing only by 2.9 percent vs. 5.7 percent in 2016 and 10.3 percent in 2015.

(5) Meager population growth

Chapman notes that a quickly aging Orange County population won't grow by much in the coming years. A key reason? Foreign immigration, a major population boost, will slow as local departures rise. By 2020, Orange County will add a net 92,000 residents — all older than 65.

(6) State, nation outpace

Orange County will be a laggard in 2017 compared with U.S job growth, forecast to rise 1.7 percent for 2017, and 2.1 percent growth in California. The national challenge will be what, if any, fiscal stimulus comes out of Washington. Statewide, the big question: How slow will the high-paying tech sector get?
Parents of UC Irvine grad who died at Electric Daisy Carnival sue LiveNation and others over his death

By Matt Hamilton

JUNE 21, 2017, 10:00 PM

The parents of a 24-year-old man who died from a drug overdose at the Electric Daisy Carnival filed a lawsuit Tuesday against the rave's promoters, claiming the slow response to their son’s medical emergency led to his death.

Nicholas Austin Tom, a UC Irvine graduate who resided in San Francisco, died of intoxication of MDMA, or Ecstasy, at the rave on June 21, 2015, according to the Clark County coroner's office. That year's event was held at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway.
His parents, Terry and Gayline Tom, alleged that Insomniac Holdings and Live Nation Entertainment — both based in Beverly Hills — were negligent in running the festival by training the staff poorly and having inadequate medical resources for the tens of thousands of attendees.

During that year's festival, known as EDC, more than 1,400 medical calls were requested and more than two dozen people were taken to the hospital, according to the lawsuit and news reports.

On the third day of the rave, amid sweltering Las Vegas heat, Tom ingested Ecstasy, a popular drug among festival-goers. About 1:30 a.m., he collapsed on the ground in a seizure.

According to the lawsuit, attendees tried to carry him through the audience and yelled for medical help, but the loud music and packed crowd delayed them.

It took about 30 minutes for Tom to be carried to the medical tent. All the while, he was unconscious and seizing, according to court papers.

Tom’s parents allege the medical tent was empty, and a ground crew that arrived had scant medical training. Their son was left on the floor for another half-hour, where he died, according to the lawsuit.

His parents stated in the suit that the “roaming medical teams” organizers touted were absent during Tom’s seizure, and the staff was either untrained or ill-equipped to handle a medical emergency.

Neither company could be reached for comment.

After Tom’s death, a spokeswoman for Insomniac expressed condolences to his family and said: “Participating in illicit drug behavior can have tragic consequences and we hold a strict zero tolerance policy for illegal activity while continually educating our fans on the dangers of drug use.”

Tom had completed his undergraduate degree in biological sciences in 2013 and became a medical assistant at UC San Francisco Medical Center. His parents said he was hoping to become a physician’s assistant.

At the time of his death, Tom was at least the fifth attendee of the Electric Daisy Carnival in Las Vegas to die from drugs or alcohol since the festival relocated from the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum in 2011.

The festival moved after a Los Angeles Times investigation disclosed how a government stadium manager who oversaw security and emergency services was also being paid by the rave company, Los Angeles-based Insomniac.

Public health and law enforcement officials have long warned about the dangers of drugs at raves and music festivals, where some opt for Ecstasy and other illicit substances to fuel hours-long dance parties.

The lawsuit filed by Tom’s parents cites Trinka Porrata, a former Los Angeles police officer and drug expert, who estimated that 85% of ravegoers are high on MDMA or other drugs. MDMA is the shortened version of Ecstasy’s scientific name. 
Characterized by the feelings of euphoria it produces in users, Ecstasy can cause body temperatures to spike to 108 degrees, leading to organ failure, seizures, coma and death.

Between 2006 and 2016, there have been at least 29 drug-related deaths nationwide among those who attended raves organized by L.A.-area companies.

On Saturday, during this year’s EDC festival at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway, a California man died, Clark County Coroner John Fudenberg told the Las Vegas Review-Journal. It’s unclear how Michael Morse, 34, died. Coroner's officials told Morse’s wife that his body temperature was 109 degrees at the time of his death, the newspaper reported.

matt.hamilton@latimes.com

Twitter: @MattHjourno

UPDATES:

10:00 p.m.: This article was updated with minor editing.

This article was originally published at 4:15 a.m.

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This article is related to: UC Irvine
Lawsuit blames transport giant LogistiCare for missed appointments and injuries suffered by Medi-Cal patients

Los Angeles County Medi-Cal patients missed dialysis treatments, suffered injuries when their wheelchairs or scooters weren’t secured in vans and endured yelling and insults by drivers paid to take them to medical appointments, according to a lawsuit filed Wednesday.

Neighborhood Legal Services of Los Angeles County filed the suit in L.A. County Superior Court against LogistiCare, the Atlanta-based company providing the rides.

Toni Vargas, one of the attorneys who filed the suit, said that she has received complaints about LogistiCare since 2014, but that the company has not made improvements. “That simple disregard is just the [hallmark] of
LogistiCare,” she said in an interview.

Medi-Cal, the state’s healthcare program for low-income residents, guarantees rides to medical appointments for patients whose conditions prevent them from traveling by bus or car. Dialysis patients are often tired and nauseous after treatment and can’t operate cars.

The transportation is frequently arranged through LogistiCare, which is one of the biggest providers of non-emergency medical transportation in the country. The firm doesn’t employ drivers directly; it contracts with vendors who provide the rides. LogistiCare coordinates 65 million rides annually in 39 states and Washington, D.C., according to its website.

Jody Gonzalez, general manager of LogistiCare California, said company officials could not comment on pending legal matters, or on individual complaints because of federal patient privacy laws.

“In Los Angeles County we provide 2.7 million trips each year and 99.8% are complaint-free. Because our goal is 100% success, we investigate every complaint and work quickly and earnestly to correct any issues,” she said in a statement.

She also pointed out that because of the huge number of rides managed by LogistiCare, even a small percentage not going as planned could mean thousands of service issues each year.

Medi-Cal has about 13.5 million participants, including 4 million in L.A. County, according to state figures. It was not clear how many Medi-Cal patients rely on LogistiCare to get to treatments.

Adam Weintraub, spokesman for the state’s Department of Health Care Services, which runs Medi-Cal, said department officials would not comment on the pending litigation.

Complaints have surfaced against LogistiCare in other states, including Wisconsin, Michigan, Connecticut and New Jersey.

Rose Ratcliff, a plaintiff in the L.A. County suit, said she needs dialysis three times a week because diabetes made her kidneys stop working.

“If you miss your appointments, you die. That machine becomes a part of you,” Ratcliff, 59, said in an interview.

She said she has often missed her four-hour appointments because vans pick her up late from her home in Van Nuys. Once, she said, a driver did not strap down the motorized scooter she uses to get around.

“I was trying to tell him, ‘Hey, I’m not locked down,’ and he kept cursing me,” Ratcliff said. She said that moving around in the vehicle damaged her scooter and left her with bruises and scrapes.

Other plaintiffs, including wheelchair users, made similar allegations.
The suit alleges that some patients have ended up in the emergency room because of shortness of breath or fluid build-up after their rides showed up late, causing them to miss some of their dialysis treatment.

Most Medi-Cal patients are part of managed-care plans, which contract directly with LogistiCare to provide transportation. The lawsuit mentions three such L.A. County plans: Health Net, Anthem Blue Cross and L.A. Care Health Plan.

Representatives of Anthem and Health Net said they would not comment on pending litigation.

Hector Andrade, spokesman for L.A. Care, said that about 10,000 of the plan’s 1 million members utilize LogistiCare each month.

“We are committed to providing high-quality care to all our members and are continuously looking for ways to make improvements,” Andrade said, adding that the plan would watch closely how the lawsuit unfolds.

soumya.karlamangla@latimes.com

Twitter: @skarlamangla

ALSO

L.A. County health officials say 42 people have been infected with mumps

Torrance Memorial hospital receives $32-million donation

A simple test is helping thousands of diabetics in L.A. County who face an increased risk of going blind

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L.A. County foster care agency botched many more payments than initially reported

By Adam Elmahrek

June 22, 2017, 5:00 AM

For months, Bea Watts waited as the Los Angeles County child protection agency failed to pay her more than $4,500 for taking care of two children in her foster care.

As bills piled up, she issued an ultimatum: The Department of Children and Family Services would have to take the children back, she said, unless it paid her by March 1.

DCFS finally paid Watts, a Simi Valley resident, but her experience wasn’t unique.

Thousands of regular assistance checks from DCFS failed to reach recipients like Watts after the agency implemented a new computer system in October. Because of glitches in the conversion, the department for several months failed to pay foster care parents, young people living on extended foster care assistance, group homes and others.
When The Times first reported the problem in January, DCFS officials said approximately 700 payments were missed. That number eventually grew to almost 4,500, DCFS figures show.

Those numbers don’t include glitches with issuing the vouchers that people on assistance fill out and return in order to receive payment. In December alone, almost 5,000 vouchers for payment — a substantial chunk of the agency’s 15,351 cases — weren’t returned to the agency, according to numbers provided by the department.

DCFS officials estimate that a little more than half of those vouchers weren’t issued correctly in the first place.

In January — the worst month — nearly 10% of all foster care payments were skipped.

The agency said that it has since cleared the backlog, which peaked in the winter. Officials said that there are still payments missed each month — though not nearly as many as just after the computer system change — but that it isn’t taking DCFS as long to make good on those skipped checks.

One former foster child, Myeisha Jackson, 21, who depended on the payments, said she was kicked out of her apartment for failing to make rent. A group home manager said she had to borrow thousands of dollars from friends to make payroll. A large foster family agency was owed money for months — as much as $1 million, county officials said.

Documents obtained by The Times under the California Public Records Act show the agency’s foster care hotline was swamped with phone calls reporting issues with payments. At the height of the problem, the county more than quadrupled the number of staffers working the phones, the documents show.

Richard Pugh, president of the Ventura County Foster Parent Assn., provides foster care to children for both Ventura and L.A. counties. Pugh said that he didn’t receive his November and December checks until February, and that he spent hours on the phone to get paid.

“It was just chaos,” Pugh said. “We’ve all been having problems.”

The L.A. County Board of Supervisors in February called for an inquiry into the “root cause” of the problem, saying that missing payments might be “more widespread than known.” The board also asked for “a plan to distribute all back pay by March 14.”

DCFS acting Director Brandon Nichols said the missed-payments issue has possibly consumed more of his time than any other since he became head of the department in February. He said that he has dedicated extraordinary resources to solving the problem, that the department has “burnt staff out” working on the issue, and that he is dismayed by reports that people suffered hardships because they weren’t paid.

However, Nichols said that people going as long as two months without receiving their payments were “rare exceptions.” When a payment is skipped, a report is generated and a manual check is cut, Nichols said. Most of the time the payment is made within 30 days of the initial payroll, he said.
The problem was most severe around January and February, Nichols said. DCFS officials were prioritizing extreme cases in which people claimed dire situations, such as impending evictions. Officials even hand-delivered checks in those situations, he said.

He also said the spike in vouchers not being submitted was caused primarily by a mix-up in the system involving foster family agencies, which oversee and are responsible for paying some of the county’s foster care parents. Rather than being issued to the agencies, the vouchers were sent to the foster parents, according to Nichols. The agencies were owed money but still paid those parents, he said.

But Nichols acknowledged that the system conversion caused some people not to receive vouchers for payment, though he said it was a rare occurrence.

Exactly how many people went unpaid for longer than 30 days is also unclear. Nichols said DCFS met the March 14 deadline for back-pay set by the Board of Supervisors.

For the department, publicity over missing payments comes at a sensitive time. DCFS officials are in the early stages of a major campaign funded by the state to recruit more foster care parents and tackle a countywide shortage in foster beds.

Nichols said he worries that media coverage of the missed payments will impede the crucial effort. He said he hadn’t heard of any foster parents saying they wouldn’t provide care in L.A. County again because of the missed-payments issue.

“I have not heard anyone say, ‘I am done doing this because people aren’t paying me on time,’” Nichols said.

But Watts said her experience made her begin to question whether to undertake the difficult task of being a foster parent for L.A. County children again.

Now, she has reached a decision.

“It’s really sad,” Watts said, “but it’s my last time fostering with L.A.”

Adam.Elmahrek@latimes.com

@adamelmahrek

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This article is related to: California Public Records Act
It’s the constant struggle with many solutions proposed for Los Angeles's chronic homelessness issue: how can we solve the homeless problem if communities aren’t willing to house them?

The latest initiative to stop short of completion is the Golden Motel project, which developers announced on Monday would not be going forward. Denver-based nonprofit developer Mercy Housing planned to purchase the old building near Temple City and convert it into housing and services for homeless veterans and the formerly homeless. Mercy says it withdrew its application for permits to renovate the building after the Golden Motel owners decided to go with a bidder who was offering more instead of waiting for Mercy to get the additional money and support they needed.

As many projects like it do, the Golden Motel project faced considerable pushback from residents of the neighborhood surrounding it. They say the project was well-intentioned but worried about the size and scope of the project, the potential for more property crimes, decreases in property values and risks to neighborhood children.

How can the city and county of Los Angeles communicate better with members of communities where homeless housing projects are being proposed? Or is the battle between developers and communities fated to be a stalemate forever?

**Guests:**

- **Chris Ko**, director of homeless initiative and the "Home for Good" program at the United Way of Greater Los Angeles
- **Lucy Liou**, resident of Temple City who opposed the Golden Motel project
Ballot measure to expand L.A. County Board of Supervisors advances

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors would be expanded from five to seven members and an elected chief executive post would be created under a measure recommended Wednesday by a state Senate panel despite opposition from the county.

Two members of the county’s 2015-16 civil grand jury testified that the group felt the current government is inadequate for a county of more than 10 million residents. They said that if the county was a state, it would be the eighth-largest state in the country based on population.
“The board is too small to adequately serve the diverse needs of county residents,” grand jury member Molly Milligan told the Senate Governance and Finance Committee, before its 5-1 vote to recommend Senate Constitutional Amendment 12. The proposed statewide ballot measure was introduced by Sen. Tony Mendoza (D-Artesia).

The proposal was opposed by Phyllis Marshall, the chief legislative representative for Los Angeles County, who noted that the proposal would allow voters statewide to decide the governance structure for one county.

“Voters in other counties do not have sufficient knowledge to vote on a constitutional amendment to change the governing structure of Los Angeles County,” Marshall told the panel before the measure was sent to another policy panel on its way to a possible full Senate vote.
A Greenfield Union student takes notes during class at Kendrick Elementary School in Bakersfield. The district is one of 15 CALmatters studied to understand how well the state’s new school funding formula is working. (Henry Barrios/The Californian)

CALMATTERS (HTTPS://CALMATTERS.ORG/)

Is California’s Investment in Needy Students Paying Off? Few Signs Indicate Achievement Gap Is Closing

By Jessica Calefati (HTTPS://CALMATTERS.ORG/ARTICLES/AUTHOR/JESSICA-CALEFATI/)
JUNE 22, 2017

California’s new system for funding public education has pumped tens of billions of extra dollars into struggling schools, but there’s little evidence yet that the investment is helping the most disadvantaged students.

A CALmatters analysis of the biggest districts with the greatest clusters of needy children found limited success with the policy’s goal (HTTPS://WWW.SBSUN.COM/GENERAL-NEWS/20130612/BROWN-PLAN-GIVES-BIG-MONEY-TO-CLOSE-EDUCATION-GAP): to close the achievement gap between these students and their more privileged peers. Instead, results in most of those places show the gap is growing.

The test scores echo a broader and growing concern about the four-year-old Local Control Funding Formula from civil rights groups, researchers (HTTPS://CALMATTERS.ORG/ARTICLES/NEEDY-CALIFORNIA-KIDS-STILL-FEWER-EDUCATION-CHOICES/) and legislators. They also raise concerns about whether the $31 billion invested so far in foster youth, kids learning English and students from low-income families has been well spent.

That concern has created a high-stakes confrontation with Gov. Jerry Brown, the formula’s architect, because his goal of shifting more responsibility to the local level means the state does not track basic information such as how much grant money each district gets for needy students or how it’s allocated.
“The state has spent tens of billions of dollars trying to lift poor kids and not one penny evaluating whether any of it is working,” said Bruce Fuller, an education policy professor at UC Berkeley. “That’s outrageous.”

Brown, who once championed the new system as “revolutionary (https://www.gov.ca.gov/news.php?id=18123),” declined to grant an interview. Last month, speaking at a Capitol news conference, the governor defended the state’s limited role in monitoring the formula’s impact.

“We want the activists, the parents, the teachers to go to their local boards and put pressure on them. They can drive their own cars, park in the local parking lots and argue there,” he said, later adding “but if there is something that we need to handle, we will.”

The CALmatters examination of the 15 largest school systems (https://calmatters.org/articles/school-funding-data-table/) where nine out of 10 kids qualify for extra funding shows that serious problems remain. Large majorities of students in these districts, which are mostly in Southern California, still fail state tests. And although test scores are improving, the growth lags behind progress made by students not targeted by the new policy.

According to the analysis:

- Almost all of the districts saw the gap between their low-income students’ proficiency in math and that of others across the state stay the same or grow larger. In reading, more than half the districts failed to nudge the gap.
- English-learners enrolled in these school systems are even worse off. Gaps between their test scores and those of fluent students grew in both subjects. A few districts even saw those students’ passing rates decline.
- Districts that responded to questions about their academic results touted improvements in raw “scale scores” that haven’t yet translated into higher levels of proficiency. But achievement gaps are growing in most of these places even when growth in raw scores is examined.
Santa Ana Deputy Superintendent David Haglund stressed the obstacles his students face: Many are Central American immigrants who arrive speaking no English, and often live with other families in crowded bungalows — doing homework on the floor or in a garage.

‘However we cut it, the funding higher poverty districts have received hasn’t translated into better opportunities for kids in lower-income schools.’

— Carrie Hahnel, Education Trust-West

“Are we happy with the results? It’s a crazy question,” he said. “No, we always want to do better. We can do better. But we have to be reasonable and rational about our students' environment.”

Disadvantaged students may not be improving more because some key changes haven’t occurred.

UC Berkeley researchers Bruce Fuller and JoonHo Lee examined whether the policy led more needy students to take courses required to attend California’s public universities. Although some districts saw progress, it wasn’t evident in places with the most needy kids.

Another statewide study published by the nonprofit civil rights group Education Trust-West found that even under the new formula, low-income students still have far less access to support staff — including counselors, nurses and psychologists — and to key courses, such as calculus, physics and music.

“However we cut it, the funding higher poverty districts have received hasn’t translated into better opportunities for kids in lower-income schools,” study author Carrie Hahnel said.

When Brown overhauled school funding four years ago, he was responding to concerns that had been building for decades. Low-income students’ test scores had long lagged about 30 percentage points behind their peers. In addition, the state’s old “categorical” system for distributing money to public schools had for years frustrated advocates of all stripes.

Brown’s plan awards districts funding based on a formula and gives them more flexibility to determine how it’s spent. Since 2013, the state has distributed about $31 billion in grant funding for disadvantaged kids, according to estimates by the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst’s Office.
Cash for disadvantaged kids

Before launching its new school finance system four years ago, California spent far less on needy students than it does today. Next year, spending is projected to be nine times greater than it was five years ago.

$31.2 billion
California's investment in disadvantaged students since overhauling its school funding formula.

California's new school funding formula acknowledges for the first time that foster youth, kids learning English and students from low-income families cost more to educate. Now, their districts get supplemental and concentration funding to help boost their achievement.

Once Brown, legislative leaders and key supporters settled on the formula's framework, they turned their attention to rules for transparency and accountability. But the parties involved in those talks couldn't reach agreement. So with a deadline looming to finalize the deal, they punted and left it up to the State Board of Education to craft the rules through regulation.
Democratic Assemblymembers Phil Ting of San Francisco and Shirley Weber of San Diego have been fighting for fiscal transparency alongside advocates for disadvantaged kids ever since. In 2014, the two lawmakers added a provision to the state budget that would have required each district to report the values of their supplemental and concentration grants separately.

But the Brown administration insisted that be deleted from the budget before lawmakers had a chance to vote on it.

The following year, Ting and Weber tried again, and Brown blocked their efforts a second time. He would only agree to impose more stringent fiscal reporting requirements in 2020, two years after he leaves office, when he says the Local Control Funding Formula will be fully phased in.

The policy called on state educators to intervene in any school district that failed to meet expectations in three out of four years. But the clock for possible state interventions wasn’t started until this year. In the meantime, the State Board of Education requires districts to file an annual Local Control and Accountability Plan with their county office of education, which will begin identifying failing school districts and offering assistance next school year.

“Are the extra resources reaching the populations we’re trying to help?” asked Ting, who chairs the Assembly Budget Committee. “Right now, we don’t know.”

The governor declined to answer any questions about his opposition to collecting spending figures now. State Board of Education President Michael Kirst said in a statement that it’s too early to fairly assess the formula’s performance, and that schools need more time to adapt to new tests and curricula.

“Drawing any kind of hard and fast conclusion about the success or failure of California’s massive shifts in the public education landscape based on only two years of test data would be irresponsible,” Kirst said.

Plus, the state just unveiled its new “dashboard,” which contains performance metrics for each of its more than 1,000 districts. It displays suspension rates, graduation rates, parent engagement, and scores from a new test, Smarter Balanced, that the state began in 2015 to evaluate student achievement.

But the dashboard lacks information about the money districts have received under the new policy.
Weber has been pushing legislation that would require the state to track and publish, broken down by type, the amount of federal state and local money given to each of California’s more than 10,000 public schools. Late last month, Assembly Bill 1321 cleared the state Assembly with unanimous support.

“There’s a lockdown on information,” said Weber, a former school board president. “It’s a major problem. And if the governor doesn’t solve this problem, we may have to dismantle this policy.”

None of the districts CALmatters studied has tracked its own spending as carefully as Greenfield Union in Bakersfield. It publishes a detailed, annual list of its investments in poor kids, foster youth and English learners.

Previously, the district’s finance and teaching teams hardly spoke and almost never collaborated, said Lori Aragon, assistant superintendent of curriculum. “The budget used to determine our needs,” she said. “Now, our needs determine the budget.” And for the first time, parents are helping the district identify those needs by sharing feedback at popular community meetings.

The strategy seems to be working.

Greenfield Union’s share of low-income students passing standardized reading and math tests grew by 9 and 7 percentage points, respectively—among the biggest gains of any district CALmatters analyzed, and well above the state’s average increase.

But as California’s booming economy slows and districts face rising pension and health care costs, the formula’s ability to drive change will weaken, meaning the state may have already seen the best of what it has to offer disadvantaged kids.

“That’s what has me concerned,” said researcher Hahnel. “The results we’ve seen so far aren’t commensurate with the investment we’ve made. Yes, change takes time, but that assumes we’re keeping our foot on the gas. Right now, it looks like we’re about to pull away.”

This is an abridged version of the complete story, which is available at CALmatters.org—a public interest journalism venture committed to explaining how California’s state Capitol works and why it matters.
WASHINGTON — Senate Republicans, who have promised a repeal of the Affordable Care Act for seven years, took a major step on Thursday toward that goal, unveiling a bill to cut Medicaid deeply and end the health law’s mandate that most Americans have health insurance.

The 142-page bill would create a new system of federal tax credits to help people buy health insurance, while offering states the ability to drop many of the benefits required by the Affordable Care Act, like maternity care, emergency services and mental health treatment.

The Senate bill — once promised as a top-to-bottom revamp of the health bill passed by the House last month — instead maintains its structure, with modest adjustments. The Senate version is, in some respects, more moderate than the House bill, offering more financial assistance to some lower-income people to help them defray the rapidly rising cost of private health insurance.

But the Senate measure, like the House bill, would phase out the extra money that the federal government has provided to states as an incentive to expand eligibility for Medicaid. And like the House measure, it would put the entire Medicaid program on a budget, ending the open-ended entitlement that now exists.
It would also repeal virtually all the tax increases imposed by the Affordable Care Act to pay for itself, in effect handing a broad tax cut to the affluent, paid for by billions of dollars sliced from Medicaid, a health care program that serves one in five Americans, not only the poor but almost two-thirds of those in nursing homes. The bill, drafted in secret, is likely to come to the Senate floor next week, and could come to a vote after 20 hours of debate.

If it passes, President Trump and the Republican Congress would be on the edge of a major overhaul of the American health care system — one-sixth of the nation’s economy.

The premise of the bill, repeated almost daily in some form or other by its chief author, the Senate majority leader, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, is that “Obamacare is collapsing around us, and the American people are desperately searching for relief.”

Mr. Trump shares that view, and the Senate bill, if adopted, would move the president a great distance closer to being able to boast about final passage of a marquee piece of legislation, a feat he has so far been unable to accomplish.

Democrats and some insurers blame the Republicans and Mr. Trump for sabotaging the law, in part by threatening to withhold subsidies used to help pay for deductibles and co-payments for millions of poor people covered by the law.

In the Senate, Democrats are determined to defend a law that has provided coverage to 20 million people and is a pillar of former President Barack Obama’s legacy. The debate over the repeal bill is shaping up as a titanic political clash, which could have major implications for both parties, affecting their electoral prospects for years to come.

Mr. McConnell faces a great challenge in amassing the votes to win Senate approval of the bill, which Republicans are trying to pass using special budget rules that will allow them to avoid a Democratic filibuster. But with only 52 seats, Mr. McConnell can afford to lose only two Republicans, with Vice President Mike Pence breaking the tie. He may have already lost one — Senator Rand Paul, Republican of Kentucky, has indicated repeatedly that the bill is too liberal for him.
Democrats are unified in opposing the repeal efforts, and they have already assailed Republicans for the work they have done so far, criticizing them for putting the bill together without a single public hearing or bill-drafting session.

In the short term, the possible electoral consequences are more muted in the Senate than in the House, as only two of the Senate Republicans who face re-election next year, Dean Heller of Nevada and Jeff Flake of Arizona, are seen as vulnerable.

But Republican leaders still must contend with internal divisions that will be difficult to overcome. Numerous Republican senators from states that expanded Medicaid are concerned about how a rollback of the program could affect their constituents, and they face pressure from governors back home.

Some senators have concerns based on other issues specific to their states, including the opioid epidemic that has battered states like West Virginia and Ohio. And some of the Senate’s most conservative members could resist a bill that they view as not going far enough in dismantling the Affordable Care Act.

Senators will not have long to sort out their differences. Mr. McConnell wants to hold a vote before lawmakers return home for the Fourth of July recess. If the repeal bill is still looming over the Senate, Republicans are certain to face intense pressure from constituents who wish to see the Affordable Care Act remain in place.

The assessment being made by senators will be shaped in part by an analysis of the bill to be released by the Congressional Budget Office, the official scorekeeper on Capitol Hill.

The budget office found that the bill passed by the House last month would leave 23 million more people without insurance in a decade. Mr. Trump recently told senators that the House bill was “mean,” though weeks earlier he had celebrated its passage.
California invested heavily in solar power. Now there's so much that other states are sometimes paid to take it

By IVAN PENN

JUNE 22, 2017

On 14 days during March, Arizona utilities got a gift from California: free solar power.

Well, actually better than free. California produced so much solar power on those days that it paid Arizona to take excess electricity its residents weren't using to avoid overloading its own power lines.
It happened on eight days in January and nine in February as well. All told, those transactions helped save Arizona electricity customers millions of dollars this year, though grid operators declined to say exactly how much. And California also has paid other states to take power.

The number of days that California dumped its unused solar electricity would have been even higher if the state hadn’t ordered some solar plants to reduce production — even as natural gas power plants, which contribute to greenhouse gas emissions, continued generating electricity.

Solar and wind power production was curtailed a relatively small amount — about 3% in the first quarter of 2017 — but that’s more than double the same period last year. And the surge in solar power could push the number even higher in the future.

Why doesn’t California, a champion of renewable energy, use all the solar power it can generate?

The answer, in part, is that the state has achieved dramatic success in increasing renewable energy production in recent years. But it also reflects sharp conflicts among major energy players in the state over the best way to weave these new electricity sources into a system still dominated by fossil-fuel-generated power.
No single entity is in charge of energy policy in California. This has led to a two-track approach that has created an ever-increasing glut of power and is proving costly for electricity users. Rates have risen faster here than in the rest of the U.S., and Californians now pay about 50% more than the national average.

Perhaps the most glaring example: The California Legislature has mandated that one-half of the state’s electricity come from renewable sources by 2030; today it’s about one-fourth. That goal once was considered wildly optimistic. But solar panels have become much more efficient and less expensive. So solar power is now often the same price or cheaper than most other types of electricity, and production has soared so much that the target now looks laughably easy to achieve.

At the same time, however, state regulators — who act independently of the Legislature — until recently have continued to greenlight utility company proposals to build more natural gas power plants.

These conflicting energy agendas have frustrated state Senate Leader Kevin de Leon (D-Los Angeles), who opposes more fossil fuel plants. He has introduced legislation that would require the state to meet its goal of 50% of its electricity from renewable sources five years earlier, by 2025. Even more ambitiously, he recently proposed legislation to require 100% of the state’s power to come from renewable energy sources by 2045.

“I want to make sure we don’t have two different pathways,” de Leon said. Expanding clean energy production and also building natural gas plants, he added, is “a bad investment.”
Environmental groups are even more critical. They contend that building more fossil fuel plants at the same time that solar production is being curtailed shows that utilities — with the support of regulators — are putting higher profits ahead of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

“California and others have just been getting it wrong,” said Leia Guccione, an expert in renewable energy at the Rocky Mountain Institute in Colorado, a clean power advocate. “The way [utilities] earn revenue is building stuff. When they see a need, they are perversely [incentivized] to come up with a solution like a gas plant.”

Regulators and utility officials dispute this view. They assert that the transition from fossil fuel power to renewable energy is complicated and that overlap is unavoidable.

They note that electricity demand fluctuates — it is higher in summer in California, because of air conditioning, and lower in the winter — so some production capacity inevitably will be underused in the winter. Moreover, the solar power supply fluctuates as well. It peaks at midday, when the sunlight is strongest. Even then it isn’t totally reliable.

Because no one can be sure when clouds might block sunshine during the day, fossil fuel electricity is needed to fill the gaps. Utility officials note that solar production is often cut back first because starting and stopping natural gas plants is costlier and more difficult than shutting down solar panels.

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In the Mojave Desert at the California/Nevada border, the Ivanpah Solar Electric Generating System uses 347,000 garage-door-sized mirrors to heat water that powers steam generators. This solar thermal plant — one of the clean energy facilities that helps produce 10% of the state’s electricity. (Mark Boster / Los Angeles Times)
Eventually, unnecessary redundancy of electricity from renewables and fossil fuel will disappear, regulators, utilities and operators of the electric grid say.

“The gas-fired generation overall will show decline,” said Neil Millar, executive director of infrastructure at CAISO, the California Independent System Operator, which runs the electric grid and shares responsibility for preventing blackouts and brownouts. “Right now, as the new generation is coming online and the older generation hasn’t left yet, there is a bit of overlap.”

Utility critics acknowledge these complexities. But they counter that utilities and regulators have been slow to grasp how rapidly technology is transforming the business. A building slowdown is long overdue, they argue.

Despite a growing glut of power, however, authorities only recently agreed to put on hold proposals for some of the new natural gas power plants that utilities want to build to reconsider whether they are needed.

A key question in the debate is when California will be able to rely on renewable power for most or all of its needs and safely phase out fossil fuel plants, which regulators are studying.

The answer depends in large part on how fast battery storage improves, so it is cheaper and can store power closer to customers for use when the sun isn’t shining. Solar proponents say the technology is advancing rapidly, making reliance on renewables possible far sooner than previously predicted, perhaps two decades or even less from now — which means little need for new power plants with a life span of 30 to 40 years.

Calibrating this correctly is crucial to controlling electricity costs.

“It’s not the renewables that’s the problem. It’s the state’s renewable policy that’s the problem,” said Gary Ackerman, president of the Western Power Trading Forum, an association of independent power producers. “We’re curtailing renewable energy in the summertime months. In the spring, we have to give people money to take it off our hands.”
Not long ago, solar was barely a rounding error for California’s energy producers.

In 2010, power plants in the state generated just over 15% of their electricity production from renewable sources. But that was mostly wind and geothermal power, with only a scant 0.5% from solar. Now that overall amount has grown to 27%, with solar power accounting for 10%, or most of the increase. The solar figure doesn’t include the hundreds of thousands of rooftop solar systems that produce an additional 4 percentage points, a share that is ever growing.

California's solar boom
The share of the state’s power generated by solar utilities and rooftop panels has skyrocketed in recent years.

![Bar graph showing the percentage of electricity generated by solar utilities and rooftop panels from 2001 to 2016.]

Note: Rooftop panels were not tracked by the federal government prior to 2014.
Source: Energy Information Administration

Behind the rapid expansion of solar power: its plummeting price, which makes it highly competitive with other electricity sources. In part that stems from subsidies, but much of the decline comes from the sharp drop in the cost of making solar panels and their increased efficiency in converting sunlight into electricity.

The average cost of solar power for residential, commercial and utility-scale projects declined 73% between 2010 and 2016. Solar electricity now costs 5 to 6 cents per kilowatt-hour — the amount needed to light a 100-watt bulb for 10 hours — to produce, or about the same as electricity produced by a natural gas plant and half the cost of a nuclear facility, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Fly over the Carrizo Plain in California’s Central Valley near San Luis Obispo and you’ll see that what was once barren land is now a sprawling solar farm, with panels covering more than seven square miles — one of the world’s largest clean-energy projects. When the sun shines over the Topaz Solar Farm, the shimmering panels produce enough electricity to power all of the residential homes in a city the size of Long Beach, population 475,000.
Other large-scale solar operations blanket swaths of the Mojave Desert, which has increasingly become a sun-soaking energy hub. The Beacon solar project covers nearly two square miles and the Ivanpah plant covers about five and a half square miles.

The state’s three big shareholder-owned utilities now count themselves among the biggest solar power producers. Southern California Edison produces or buys more than 7% of its electricity from solar generators, Pacific Gas & Electric 13% and San Diego Gas & Electric 22%.

Similarly, fly over any sizable city and you’ll see warehouses, businesses and parking lots with rooftop solar installations, and many homes as well.

With a glut of solar power at times, CAISO has two main options to avoid a system overload: order some solar and wind farms to temporarily halt operations or divert the excess power to other states.

That’s because too much electricity can overload the transmission system and result in power outages, just as too little can. Complicating matters is that even when CAISO requires large-scale solar plants to shut off panels, it can’t control solar rooftop installations that are churning out electricity.

CAISO is being forced to juggle this surplus more and more.

In 2015, solar and wind production were curtailed about 15% of the time on average during a 24-hour period. That rose to 21% in 2016 and 31% in the first few months of this year. The surge in solar production accounts for most of this, though heavy rainfall has increased hydroelectric power production in the state this year, adding to the surplus of renewables.
Pulling the plug
California’s clean energy supply is growing so fast that solar and wind producers are increasingly being ordered to halt production.

Volume of power curtailments (in megawatt-hours)

Even when solar production is curtailed, the state can produce more than it uses, because it is difficult to calibrate supply and demand precisely. As more homeowners install rooftop solar, for example, their panels can send more electricity to the grid than anticipated on some days, while the state’s overall power usage might fall below what was expected.

This means that CAISO increasingly has excess solar and wind power it can send to Arizona, Nevada and other states.

When those states need more electricity than they are producing, they pay California for the power. But California has excess power on a growing number of days when neighboring states don’t need it, so California has to pay them to take it. CAISO calls that “negative pricing.”

Why does California have to pay rather than simply give the power away free?

When there isn’t demand for all the power the state is producing, CAISO needs to quickly sell the excess to avoid overloading the electricity grid, which can cause blackouts. Basic economics kick in. Oversupply causes prices to fall, even below zero. That’s because Arizona has to curtail its own sources of electricity to take California’s power when it doesn’t really need it, which can cost money. So Arizona will use power from California at times like this only if it has an economic incentive — which means being paid.
In the first two months of this year, CAISO paid to send excess power to other states seven times more often than same period in 2014. “Negative pricing” happened in an average of 18% of all sales, versus about 2.5% in the same period in 2014.

Most “negative pricing” typically has occurred for relatively short periods at midday, when solar production is highest.

But what happened in March shows how the growing supply of solar power could have a much greater impact in the future. The periods of “negative pricing” lasted longer than in the past — often for six hours at a time, and once for eight hours, according to a CAISO report.

The excess power problem will ease somewhat in the summer, when electricity usage is about 50% higher in California than in the winter.

But CAISO concedes that curtailments and “negative pricing” is likely to happen even more often in the future as solar power production continues to grow, unless action is taken to better manage the excess electricity.
Arizona’s largest utility, Arizona Public Service, is one of the biggest beneficiaries of California’s largesse because it is next door and the power can easily be sent there on transmission lines.

On days that Arizona is paid to take California’s excess solar power, Arizona Public Service says it has cut its own solar generation rather than fossil fuel power. So California’s excess solar isn’t reducing greenhouse gases when that happens.

CAISO says it does not calculate how much it has paid others so far this year to take excess electricity. But its recent oversupply report indicated that it frequently paid buyers as much as $25 per megawatt-hour to get them to take excess power, according to the Energy Information Administration.

That’s a good deal for Arizona, which uses what it is paid by California to reduce its own customers’ electricity bills. Utility buyers typically pay an average of $14 to $45 per megawatt-hour for electricity when there isn’t a surplus from high solar power production.

With solar power surging so much that it is sometimes curtailed, does California need to spend $6 billion to $8 billion to build or refurbish eight natural gas power plants that have received preliminary approval from regulators, especially as legislative leaders want to accelerate the move away from fossil fuel energy?

The answer depends on whom you ask.

Utilities have repeatedly said yes. State regulators have agreed until now, approving almost all proposals for new power plants. But this month, citing the growing electricity surplus, regulators announced plans to put on hold the earlier approvals of four of the eight plants to determine if they really are needed.
Big utilities continue to push for all of the plants, maintaining that building natural gas plants doesn’t conflict with expanding solar power. They say both paths are necessary to ensure that California has reliable sources of power — wherever and whenever it is needed.

The biggest industrial solar power plants, they note, produce electricity in the desert, in some cases hundreds of miles from population centers where most power is used.

At times of peak demand, transmission lines can get congested, like Los Angeles highways. That’s why CAISO, utilities and regulators argue that new natural gas plants are needed closer to big cities. In addition, they say, the state needs ample electricity sources when the sun isn’t shining and the wind isn’t blowing enough.

Utility critics agree that some redundancy is needed to guarantee reliability, but they contend that the state already has more than enough.

California has so much surplus electricity that existing power plants run, on average, at slightly less than one-third of capacity. And some plants are being closed decades earlier than planned.

As for congestion, critics note that the state already is crisscrossed with an extensive network of transmission lines. Building more plants and transmission lines wouldn’t make the power system much more reliable, but would mean higher profits for utilities, critics say.

That is what the debate is about, said Jaleh Firooz, a power industry consultant who previously worked as an engineer for San Diego Gas & Electric for 24 years and helped in the formation of CAISO.

“They have the lopsided incentive of building more,” she said.
Jaleh Firooz, who worked 24 years as an engineer for San Diego Gas & Electric Co., says utilities seeking higher profits “have the lopsided incentive of building more” power plants and transmission lines. (Robert Gauthier/Los Angeles Times)

The reason: Once state regulators approve new plants or transmission lines, the cost is now built into the amount that the utility can charge electricity users — no matter how much or how little it is used.

Given that technology is rapidly tilting the competitive advantage toward solar power, there are less expensive and cleaner ways to make the transition toward renewable energy, she said.

To buttress her argument, Firooz pointed to a battle in recent years over a natural gas plant in Redondo Beach.

Independent power producer AES Southland in 2012 proposed replacing an aging facility there with a new one. The estimated cost: $250 million to $275 million, an amount that customers would pay off with higher electricity bills.

CAISO and Southern California Edison, which was going to buy power from the new plant, supported it as necessary to protect against potential power interruptions. Though solar and wind power production was increasing, they said those sources couldn’t be counted on because their production is variable, not constant.
The California Public Utilities Commission approved the project, agreeing that it was needed to meet the long-term electricity needs in the L.A. area.

But the California Coastal Conservancy, a conservation group opposed to the plant, commissioned an analysis by Firooz to determine how vital it was. Her conclusion: not at all.

Firooz calculated that the L.A. region already had excess power production capacity — even without the new plant — at least through 2020.

Along with the cushion, her report found, a combination of improved energy efficiency, local solar production, storage and other planning strategies would be more than sufficient to handle the area’s power needs even as the population grew.

She questioned utility arguments.

“"In their assumptions, the amount of capacity they give to the solar is way, way undercut because they have to say, ‘What if it’s cloudy? What if the wind is not blowing?’ ” Firooz explained. “That’s how the game is played. You build these scenarios so that it basically justifies what you want.”

— Jaleh Firooz, power-industry consultant

Undeterred, AES Southland pressed forward with its proposal. In 2013, Firooz updated her analysis at the request of the city of Redondo Beach, which was skeptical that a new plant was needed. Her findings remained the same.

Nonetheless, the state Public Utilities Commission approved the project in March 2014 on the grounds that it was needed. But the California Energy Commission, another regulatory agency whose approval for new plants is required along with the PUC’s, sided with the critics. In November 2015 it suspended the project, effectively killing it.
Asked about the plant, AES said it followed the appropriate processes in seeking approval. It declined to say whether it still thinks that a new plant is needed.

The existing facility is expected to close in 2020.

A March 2017 state report showed why critics are confident that the area will be fine without a new plant: The need for power from Redondo Beach’s existing four natural gas units has been so low, the state found, that the units have operated at less than 5% of their capacity during the last four years.

Contact the reporter (mailto:ivan.penn@latimes.com). For more coverage follow @ivanlpenn (https://twitter.com/ivanlpenn)

Credits: Times data editor Ben Welsh and staff writer Ryan Menezes contributed to this report. Illustrations by Eben McCue. Graphics by Priya Krishnakumar and Thomas Suh Lauder. Produced by Sean Greene

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