

## Northern exposure: Covering issues of Northern California

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### **Atheists' road signs, billboard are targets of religious vandalism**

BUTTE COUNTY The godless volunteers who gather roadside garbage along Highway 99 have picked up some unwelcome trash of their own.

Atheists of Butte County reported their Adopt-A-Highway marker was vandalized with stickers that added "God loves" to their name on the official Caltrans road sign.

The incident demonstrates how necessary it is to offer a safe space for freedom of conscience, said George Gold, the Butte County atheists' president: "Whenever an atheist is public about her or his identity, there are others who will seek to impose and proselytize their opposing views."

The incident last month on a stretch of highway 2 miles south of Chico is the third act of vandalism to the local atheists' signage. Last year, someone added "pray" to an Adopt-A-Highway marker. A prominent billboard in Chico reading "Don't believe in God? Join the club" had the word "Don't" cut out of the vinyl.

The defacement is the work of "a few bad apples" and does not represent the local religious community, Gold said.

And it doesn't happen very often to Adopt-A-Highway signs, said David Boggs, the program's coordinator for Butte and 10 surrounding counties. "Apparently some people are offended by the group and vandalize to express their displeasure," he said.

The atheists may have a chance to respond. They will deliver an invocation to the Chico City Council at its first meeting of the year. It will be secular, Gold said, "friendly and inclusive."

### **Tribes celebrate agency's reversal on increasing flow of two rivers**

HOOPA North Coast tribes are celebrating a bittersweet victory over the release of water into the drought-stricken Trinity and lower Klamath rivers.

“I feel happy the water’s coming down, sad we had to go over such tremendous hurdles to get it,” said Danielle Vigil-Masten, Hoopa Valley tribal chairwoman.

In a decision last month that reversed its previous direction, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation agreed to increase the flow in the Trinity River by more than five times to protect salmon as well as tribal communities.

Vigil-Masten was one of about 200 tribal members and river activists who rallied in front of the bureau’s Sacramento headquarters. The gathering capped weeks of petitioning the federal agency to acknowledge river conditions worse than the 2002 drought, when tens of thousands of fish died due to disease and parasites caused by the low flow and high temperatures.

The decision releases water from reservoirs built to shuttle it into a federal conveyance system to benefit users in the Sacramento Valley. It withstood a challenge by two Central Valley agricultural users seeking to halt the water releases.

The higher flows should be enough to protect the fall-run chinook salmon in the lower Klamath River, said Don Reck, a bureau scientist.

That leaves the tribes in a continuation of the long-term battle for the salmon and local communities dependent on the river water for their health, Vigil-Masten said. “This will be an ongoing issue until the state of California comes up with a plan to conserve water,” she said.

### **Caltrans meetings put focus on future effects of climate change**

CRESCENT CITY Rising sea levels, heavier rainfall, eroding cliffs: Caltrans is getting the North Coast ready for climate change.

A series of public meetings in Del Norte and adjacent counties is part of developing a strategy for the effects on the region’s transportation system.

Planners have already identified what they call “vulnerable, critical and exposed assets” – technical terms for places particularly susceptible to changing climate conditions. Among

them are Del Norte's Last Chance Grade, areas around Humboldt Bay and low-lying sections of Highway 101 subject to flooding.

The public meetings are designed to discuss strategies for adapting to these transportation vulnerabilities. They have been well-attended, with people sharing their opinions and fears about how to prepare for an uncertain future, said Rebecca Crow, project manager for GHD, a Eureka-based engineering firm contracted to do the analysis for Caltrans.

Adapting to climate change could include everything from building berms, barricades and elevated highways to using wetlands and beaches to reduce the impacts of sea-level rise.

The goal is to be prepared for the changes most scientists believe are inevitable.

"You can doubt climate change, but the rising impacts of extreme weather events on highways are hard to ignore," Crow said.

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