

Water theft, help for fire victims and a deer invasion are challenges for North State towns

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Wave of water theft washes over Humboldt

HUMBOLDT COUNTY -- The statewide drought has hit California's second-wettest county with a weird wave of crime: water theft.

Sheriff's officials opened a criminal case last month after a home in Shelter Cove tallied usage of 146,802 gallons of water – enough to fill a three-bedroom, two-bath house from floor to ceiling. The spigots would have had to be open and flowing 12 hours a day for 30 days straight, said Philip Young, general manager of the Shelter Cove Resort Improvement District.

But no one was home.

This is the largest water theft from a single residence in county history, said Steve Knight, Humboldt County Sheriff's Department spokesman. It's the amount that's unprecedented, not the crime.

Other residences and commercial buildings have also been tapped, Knight said. He suspects local marijuana growers of stealing water to irrigate their crops as they approach harvest.

In a year when the area received half its average of 50 inches of rain, streams have gone dry. Even the Eel and Van Duzen rivers have gone underground, leaving isolated pools in place of the normal flow.

"Water is a precious commodity. As the drought continues, we expect to see more of this," Knight said.

The Shelter Cove water district has offered a \$1,000 reward for information leading to an arrest. Meanwhile, the hapless owner faces a \$1,500 water bill for the month of August.

Displaced Weed residents need food, cash, workers

WEED -- Hold the shirts and shoes.

It's nonperishable food, cash and volunteers the community needs, said Weed Mayor Bob Hall.

The Sept. 15 fire that blasted through this Siskiyou County town destroyed 143 homes – almost a third of residences. It also damaged the elementary and high schools and a sawmill, its primary employer.

“It hit like a blowtorch, it happened so fast,” Hall said. “It left us flattened – totally flattened.”

Six weeks and an outpouring of donations later, the community is focusing on feeding and finding housing for the nearly 1,000 residents whose homes burned. Many are low-income families with no insurance, now faced with renting housing for the winter.

No one likes to ask for money, but that is what the community really needs to help relocate fire victims, said Justin Mayberry, a sergeant with the Weed Police Department and acting city spokesman.

“Imagine walking out your front door without anything. That's what these people have,” he said.

Hall said nonperishable food would also be welcome, along with volunteers to help distribute the donations. The city has set up a recovery hub website at weed.recovers.org.

“We're going to be in recovery mode for quite a while,” Hall said.

As to more clothes? Weed says thanks, but no thanks.

Deer invade Alturas, have become aggressive

ALTURAS -- Bambi and his children have taken up residence in this Modoc County seat, and almost no one is charmed.

“Drive down any street and you’re going to see deer – lots of them,” said Alturas Mayor John Dederick.

The damage they do has escalated from chomped rosebushes to vehicle accidents. Recently a doe fatally kicked a family dog.

That has Dederick anxious: “They’ve become aggressive. ... What’s next, our kids?”

After local residents took their concerns to a recent City Council meeting, Dederick began hunting for a way to reduce or rid the city of its unwanted ungulates. He plans to invite California Department of Fish and Wildlife officials to the council’s meeting Oct. 21.

City yards offer a safe haven where deer are protected from predators, said Andrew Hughan, a department spokesman. Beyond the tempting flowers, shrubs and fruit trees, he suspects people are feeding them.

“Why would they leave if they’re safe and warm and fed?” Hughan said.

Municipalities throughout Northern California are reporting a proliferation of deer within their city limits. But Dederick hopes state wildlife officials have some solutions, because he’s at a loss.

“Frankly, I don’t know what we’ll do,” he said. “I’d hate to think we’d have to shoot them all.”

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