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Mountain Town News: Can Taos hit the 100 percent mark for renewables?

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TAOS, N.M. – Like nearly all places, Taos and adjoining communities consume fossil fuels voraciously. Most of the electricity comes from coal-fired power plants, and homes are heated by natural gas and propane. Cars and trucks are fueled by gasoline and diesel.

Can all this be converted to renewables? It's a tall task, but a group called Renewable Taos Inc. has a vision for this giant energy transition. At the center of this vision is Kit Carson Electric Cooperative. Until last year, it got its electricity from Tri-State Generation and Transmission, which also provided electricity to 43 other co-ops in the Rocky Mountain states, including several that deliver electricity to Durango, Telluride and Crested Butte.

Now, Kit Carson contracts with Guzman Energy Group, and together they have a goal of dramatically increasing solar energy production locally to match local energy consumption. The aim is to add up to 30 megawatts of solar generation by 2023. Coupled with battery storage, directors think it can provide virtually all of the co-ops needs for day-time power.

Doing so can save the co-op's 30,000 members more than \$50 million during the next 10 years, according to a press release issued by Kit Carson.

This, according to a report in the Taos News, is part of a broader vision to eventually deliver 200 megawatts of generation, providing electricity not just for lights and power saws and so forth, but ultimately for electric cars to displace gas and diesel. Switching homes to electric heat to reduce natural gas and propane use is also part of the big vision.

Bob Bresnahan, a member of Renewable Taos and a director of Kit Carson Electric, says the financing is in place for six or seven solar projects this year. Solar has dropped 80 percent in the last decade, and he predicts even deeper reductions: from 4.8 cents per kilowatt-hour today to 2.4 cents. He also predicts price reductions in battery storage systems.

IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES CONTINUE TO BE JITTERY

PARK CITY, Utah – Things continue to be jittery in the immigrant communities of resort valleys, as evidenced by reports out of both Park City, Utah, and Ketchum, Idaho.

A hastily organized forum about enforcement of immigration laws in Park City drew 300 to 350 people. The meeting was held after agents from the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, arrested four residents on felony charges involving illegal entry into the United States.

At the forum, reports The Park Record, local law-enforcement chiefs drew applause when they indicated they would not partner with the federal government in enforcing immigration laws.

But the subtext of the story is more nuanced. Utah's Summit County Sheriff Justin Martinez said that when someone arrested by his deputies cannot prove he or she is in the United States legally, his employees contact ICE for assistance with identification. However, ICE determines whether the individual remains jailed or can post bail and gain release.

The newspaper conflates Latinos with immigrants, suggesting all Latinos in the Park City area — about 25 percent of the population now — are immigrants. In Colorado, the Vail area has had a large Latino population since the 1920s, when Latinos from southern Colorado and New Mexico moved northward to work in the mines.

In Idaho, Ketchum elected officials approved a resolution inherently political: All people, are welcome, including immigrants, and among those undocumented immigrants and those who are refugees.

Idaho has no cities that have declared themselves sanctuaries for illegal immigrants. But Boise, and now Ketchum, have adopted so-called "welcome" resolutions.

Suzanne Frick, the Ketchum city administrator, says that because Ketchum contracts with the Blaine County Sheriff's Department for law enforcement, it doesn't have the authority to tell sheriff's deputies what federal directives should or should not be followed. As such, it cannot be a sanctuary city. Instead, it is a "welcoming city," she says.

Mayor Nina Jonas told the Idaho Mountain Express that "driving a segment of the community underground is not the healthiest, strongest or safest thing to do."

NEW APP ALLOWS BETTER ESTIMATE OF MARCHERS

PARK CITY, Utah – Technology is allowing law-enforcement agencies or anyone else to better estimate crowd sizes. A case in point is the Women's March held the day after the inauguration of President Donald Trump.

In Park City, organizers had expected 4,000 to 5,000 people to show up for the march on Main Street. Surveying the size of the crowd that Saturday police estimated the number at 5,000 to 7,000.

Using a smartphone app, Utah's Summit County Sheriff's Department Lt. Nick Wilkinson has concluded that 7,000 to 9,000 took to Main Street. The new app, called CrowdSize, provides a number based on how many people could fit in a given space, with options for medium and high densities.

He said the more reliable estimate will be used as law-enforcement and other public officials plan for accommodating well-attended public events.

DO CELLPHONES BELONG IN WILDERNESS AREAS?

ASPEN, Colo. – Earlier this winter, climber and skier Colter Hinchliffe and a friend were engulfed in an avalanche deep in the backcountry. It wasn't a designated wilderness, but it was wilderness-type lands.

The friend suffered a broken leg, so Hinchliffe got out his cellphone. They had service, and the local search and rescue team was able to respond with a helicopter, because the cellphone had a GPS feature.

"We were rescued quickly and safely," Hinchliffe tells the Aspen Daily News. "If we hadn't had a phone, or if there hadn't been any coverage, he would have spent a long and cold night out."

Still, he has mixed feelings about uses of cellphones in wilderness. It increases safety.

"But I am concerned about people misusing their phones, calling for help just because they sprained their ankle. I feel that a big part of the wilderness experience is being able to get yourself out."

The story illustrates the various ambivalences in Aspen and elsewhere about increased cellular coverage in wilderness. Pitkin County has set out to boost broadband infrastructure. One potential repercussion of that investment, points out the Daily News' John Fayhee, is expanded cellphone coverage —including into the designated wilderness areas of the county.

The Wilderness Society, an organization with 700,000 members, has been wary about adding infrastructure adjacent to wilderness areas, such as cell towers on the edge of Mt. Rainier National Park. But the organization's Paul Sanford also notes that it may be impossible to keep cellphones out of wilderness areas. Nor does he think they're necessarily a bad thing.

"The Wilderness Society believes the wilderness experience ought to be as free of technology as possible. But we also want young people to experience wilderness, and cellphones are integrated into the consciousness of most young people. They enjoy taking selfies.

"They like Instagram. By sharing the impressions of wilderness, they are spreading the word, much the same way earlier-era photographers did," he continues. "Who is to say that experiencing the wilderness with a cellphone is any less gratifying than experiencing it without a phone."

TREE WELL CLAIMS ANOTHER LIFE IN THE SIERRA NEVADA

TRUCKEE, Calif. – Another life has been claimed by a tree well, this time at Northstar, the resort near Truckee owned by Vail Resorts. The Sierra Sun reports that a 43-year-old snowboarder died after being fished out of the tree well.

"We found him on his back, in a tree well, unconscious," Dane Jasper told the Sierra Sun. "Together, we couldn't pull (the victim) out, so we kept shouting until another man arrived, and the three of us managed to pull (the victim) out. We gave CPR until the ski patrol arrived, but (the victim) wasn't responsive."

For Jasper, the chilling case was a reminder to never ski or board alone.

The Sierra Sun says that 94 inches, or 7.83 feet, had fallen in the seven days prior.

JACKSON HOLE'S DISASTER SPARKS REDUNDANCY TALK

KETCHUM, Idaho – Early in the last decade, an avalanche took out a power line in the Telluride area. The town kept humming, as it was served by a different line. But the avalanche served as a reminder that redundancy of electrical transmission was important.

While Telluride has since gained that redundancy, the vulnerability of Jackson Hole Mountain Resort and Teton Village became evident in early February when powerful wind snapped 26 wooden transmission lines along the road to the resort. Power was out for four days. The road over nearby Teton Pass, over which a large portion of the workforce for Jackson and the broader Jackson Hole community commute, was also closed for four days because of avalanche danger.

All of this was noticed in the Ketchum-Sun Valley resort community of Idaho. The Idaho Mountain Express notes that Idaho Power is trying to remove a similar vulnerability by building a second transmission line in the Wood River Valley between the communities of Hailey and Ketchum, which are about 10 miles apart.

This would produce more visual obstruction, steel poles about 60 feet tall, although a portion would be underground.

The Express reports some local opposition. Aimee Christensen, a local advocate for renewable energy, argues for more local renewable generation. A wind storm powerful enough to topple power poles in one line might well be strong enough to take out another set of transmission lines, she contends.

ENOUGH SNOW ALREADY FOR SKIING INTO JULY AT SQUAW

TRUCKEE, Calif. – Squaw Valley plans to stay open until July 4, something it hasn't done since 2011. Last year it closed in late May, on Memorial Day.

Squaw had recorded 565 inches of snow as of last week, compared to the average 450 inches for the same day. January was the snowiest in 45 years of record-keeping at the resort.

Vail Resorts reported that this is the snowiest winter for the Tahoe area in 22 years. It's also a very rainy season 100-plus miles away at Sacramento. Normally dry and sunny, Sacramento has received more rain than either Portland or Seattle.

POT CLUBS IN ASPEN? AND VISITS TO EMERGENCY ROOMS

ASPEN, Colo. – It's now been three years and two months since Colorado began sales of marijuana for recreational use, and Gov. John Hickenlooper says he's starting to get comfortable with legalization. Hickenlooper, who grew wealthy and gained prominence as a craft brewer, opposed legalization. But on "Meet the Press" on Sunday, he told moderator Chuck Todd that he's still not "there yet, but we have made a lot of progress."

Hickenlooper went on to say that there has been no great spike in use by teenagers, as some had feared, and there's anecdotal evidence of fewer drug deals.

"Maybe this system is better than what was admittedly a pretty bad system to begin with," he said, referring to the days before legalization.

Hickenlooper downplayed hints offered by the Trump administration that it may enforce federal laws that ban any sales or use of marijuana, just as it has vowed to enforce federal laws governing immigration.

But Colorado is still fine-tuning its legalization. One issue still up in the air is how much public consumption will be tolerated. Aspen has allowed three private events in Aspen during the past three Winter X Games in which attendees could openly and legally consume marijuana. But you can't smoke it in hotels, nor in public bars.

Denver officials are working on regulations to open a one-year pilot of bring-your-own marijuana clubs. State lawmakers may consider measures to allow either "tasting rooms" run by marijuana dispensers or smoker-friendly clubs akin to cigar bars

Aspen Mayor Steve Skadron says he's open to having a conversation about businesses that allow public consumption. The Aspen Times explains that the city decided against private pot clubs in 2015 because of ambiguity in state law concerning private smoking venues, along with worries about how they could negatively affect Aspen's image

Colorado is still assessing the impact of legalization on public health, a process that is likely to take many years. The fundamental problem is that because it was illegal, there was no baseline for measuring changes.

Now that marijuana use is legal in Colorado's eyes, there's no reason not to tell doctors why you're at the emergency room of the hospital with more THC – the psychoactive agent in cannabis – in your blood than you know what to do with.

A report, Monitoring Health Concerns Related to Marijuana in Colorado in 2016, found that Summit County led the state in emergency room visits related to marijuana consumption, with 56 per 1,000 residents, and Routt County – where Steamboat Springs is located – came in second at 17 per 1,000. This was for a year earlier after legalized sales began.

Dr. David Wilkinson, medical director of the Emergency Department at Yampa Valley Medical Center, told the Steamboat Today that nearly all the cases have involved

edible marijuana. "They get extremely anxious, they're hyperventilating, they're over-emotional," he said. He told the newspaper that he thinks the community has a responsibility to more thoroughly educate people, particularly children, about the drug.

Due to recreational legalization, children are making judgments at an earlier age about what they think of marijuana and whether they'll try it, Wilkinson said.