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CALIFORNIA PLANT RESCUE

RACE TO SAVE WILD SEEDS, SPROUTS



PHOTOS: DAI SUGANO — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

UC Santa Cruz Arboretum native plant specialist Alex Hubner examines Guirado's goldenrod, a perennial herb native to coastal mountains of Central California, during his search for seeds of vulnerable rare plants in San Benito County.

UC Santa Cruz program collects, preserves rare or endangered plant species

By Lisa M. Krieger
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On a cool autumn morning, deep in the rugged backcountry of San Benito County, Alex Hubner bounces over boulders in his Toyota Tacoma truck, eyeing each passing plant like a bounty hunter seeking prey.

He stops suddenly beside a lonely gray-green lump, its roots gripping the inhospitable serpentine soil like skeletal fingers.

Crouching over the plant, Hubner takes a closer look. It's a rare variety of sulfur buckwheat — past its prime, seeds scattered.

"When you're late, you can end up with a whole lot of nothing," he said, probing the dirt in disappointment.

Then he's off in search of others.

Based at UC Santa Cruz, Hubner and his wife, Lucy Ferneyhough, are collectors for California Plant Rescue, a state-funded consortium of botanical institutions that aims to find and conserve the botanical diversity of the Golden State.

With species disappearing at an alarming rate, the couple's efforts help California Plant Rescue build a network of plant banks to store seeds and sprouts,



Seeds from a rare variety of sulphur buckwheat are shown during a demonstration of how the rare plant's seeds are processed and stored at the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum.

each a modern-day Noah's Ark that could help protect against the permanent loss of rich, unique and irreplaceable lives.

California Plant Rescue has achieved remarkable success. Since its founding in 2014, its members have collected seeds from 78% of California's 1,166 rare, threatened or endangered plant species, according to Katie Heineman of the Escondido-based Center for Plant Conservation, which sponsors the effort.

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Rare plants' seeds are stored at minus-10 degrees in a freezer at the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum.

'LONG, HARD-FOUGHT CAMPAIGN'

Mahan to be next mayor of San Jose

Councilman declares victory with more than 51% of vote after Chavez concedes tight race

By John Woolfolk
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After more than a week of counting votes and months of a tense campaign centered on crime and homelessness, San Jose has a new mayor.

Matt Mahan, the rookie city councilman backed by the incumbent mayor, declared victory on Wednesday after his challenger and longtime labor-backed South Bay politician Cindy Chavez called to concede the tight race.

"The count as of today now shows our campaign for common sense will win a majority of the votes," Mahan said. "This has been a long and hard-fought campaign. But what unites us as a city is much more powerful than any divisions from a political contest."

The battle for San Jose mayor was one of three high-profile Santa Clara County races that remained close more than a week after the election. In the Santa Clara County sheriff's race, Bob Jensen led Kevin Jensen by just under 1.5 percentage points. And in the Santa Clara mayor race, Anthony Becker conceded to Mayor Lisa Gillmor on Wednesday afternoon.

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WASHINGTON

Senate advances bill protecting same-sex marriage

12 Republicans join all Democrats in support of landmark legislation

By Annie Karni
The New York Times

The Senate on Wednesday took a crucial step toward passing landmark legislation to provide federal protections for same-sex marriages, as 12 Republicans joined Democrats to advance the Respect for Marriage Act, putting it on track to become law in the twilight of the Democratic-held Congress.

The 62-37 vote, which came only days after the midterm elections in which Democrats retained control of the Senate but were on track to lose the House to Republicans, was a rare and notable last gasp of bipartisanship by a lame-duck Congress as lawmakers looked toward an era of political gridlock in a divided Washington.

It also signaled a remarkable shift in American politics and culture, demonstrating how same-sex marriage — once a politically divi-

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'THE NUMBERS ARE PRETTY STARK'

Report: California faces \$25B budget deficit in 2023

New predictions could impact various projects as recession looms

By Marisa Kendall
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As the state teeters on the brink of a recession, California is in for a dizzying reversal likely to send us plunging from a record \$100 billion surplus to a projected \$25

billion shortfall next year, according to sobering new data from the state's fiscal analyst.

The grim news isn't as shocking as the numbers — the entire nation is grappling with inflation and soaring interest rates, and Gov. Gavin Newsom has been warning a downturn is coming. But the gloomy predictions — which, if true, would reflect the state's weakest performance since the Great Recession — could impact everything from efforts to

fight homelessness and climate change to the state's ability to finish key transportation projects to Newsom's political future.

"The numbers are pretty stark," said Matt Regan, senior vice president of public policy for the Bay Area Council. "\$25 billion is a very, very large sum of money."

And the deficit isn't expected to disappear anytime soon. Following a predicted budget shortfall of \$25 billion during the 2023-2024 fiscal year, the state likely will

be short \$17 billion the following year — and deficits will continue at least through the 2026-27 fiscal year, according to the report by the state's Legislative Analyst's Office.

On the bright side, California has \$23 billion available in general fund reserves — but the report doesn't recommend tapping into it yet. That's because if a recession does hit, the state's finances could end up looking even worse than the current projec-

tions. So for now, the report suggests legislators reexamine funds from the current budget that have been allocated but not yet distributed and look for places where funds can be cut or put on hold.

Thanks to those reserves, the state is in its "best-ever" position to weather a downturn, said H.D. Palmer, deputy director for external affairs in the state's Department of Finance.

"But while we're in fact better

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Seeds

FROM PAGE 1

An infusion of \$3.6 million in state funding is boosting efforts to collect and preserve the remaining species. Prior to state support, the group banked only about 35 species a year. Now it's averaging 131 species a year.

"These plants are part of our heritage and part of the biodiversity of the planet. Things can blink out at any point," said Brett Hall, who directs UC Santa Cruz's effort. "Having them safeguarded is hedge-betting for their futures."

UC Santa Cruz's Native Plant Program is a leader in the effort. Based at the university's Arboretum, this year the program saved 50,000 seeds. It has a total of 375 collections, representing 206 different species. Each specimen is stored in a small foil envelope in a chest freezer that is maintained at minus-10 degrees, cold enough for seeds to stay viable for years, perhaps decades.

UC Berkeley collectors are also contributing, banking seeds of the rare Humboldt Bay owl's-clover and 12 other species.

The plight of plants can get lost among the dramatic tales of endangered mammals or birds, say ecologists.

And, at first, each loss makes little difference. When one tiny plant goes extinct, our world isn't radically changed. But over time, like an airplane losing its rivets, the ecosystem will crash, warn scientists.

"We're only beginning to understand these webs of interconnectedness," said Hubner. "The web seems resilient. But when you start removing too many strands out of the web, down it goes."

Until recently, collectors have favored the scenic and easy spots.



Lucy Ferneyhough is the Native Plant Program project manager at the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum.

The remote and rougher parts of the state — especially the interior central coast, with both the highest concentration of endemic plant species and imperiled plant species in the U.S. — are underrepresented.

Hubner, 36, and Ferneyhough, 32, are helping change that.

Restless, fit and focused, they came to UC Santa Cruz to follow their passion for native plants. While seeds are their focus, they may also take cuttings or, if the plant is abundant, bring it home to reproduce in the Arboretum's nursery. The Arboretum's Native Plant Program is paid \$1,250 for each collection and another \$1,250 for seed processing and preservation.

Poring over a computerized database of historical observations, they plan their routes. In a truck that is outfitted for spending days alone in the wilderness, they've traveled to Modoc and Lassen counties, the Santa Lucia Mountains, the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada and beyond.

"We're good at finding things," said Hubner. "It's addicting."

"The entire state becomes like

a game board," he said. "You only have a certain amount of daylight and drinking water and gasoline and whatever else you need to get into these super deep remote places."

Plants are not always where they're supposed to be. Perhaps it's been eaten by an animal, lost to wildfire or died by drought. And the timing is tricky. If found too early, its seeds aren't ripe; if too late, they've dispersed.

Sleuths, they tracked down a rare coyote mint in the hills above Lompoc. They found a True's mountain jewelweed in Tahoe National Forest, its only known site.

Nearly 9,000 feet up in Desolation Wilderness, on north-facing granite between two glacial lakes, they discovered the tiny Cup Lake draba.

In a landscape still hot, charred and smoky from wildfire in Mendocino National Forest, they spotted a moist green oasis. There, thriving, were clusters of elusive Klamath sedge.

They take no more than 10% of a plant's seeds, leaving the rest for Mother Nature. Back home at

the Arboretum, collection information is entered into a database. The seeds go straight into low-humidity dryers.

Seeds must be cleaned before storage to prevent infection by dangerous fungi. Sieves are used to separate the seed from the chaff. Then the seeds are tossed in a blower to remove fine debris.

Finally, each seed is counted. "It's tedious," said Hubner. "It's literally bean-counting."

Half of the collection stays at the Arboretum; the other half goes to a different seed bank for safekeeping. Horticulturalists may attempt germination.

November marks the waning of the collection season. With days getting colder and darker, plants are drawing down their energy for necessary rest.

But sulfur buckwheat is a late bloomer. Its tiny teardrop-shaped seeds ripen slowly, then drop.

Hubner's search begins in an empty campground at Clear Creek Recreation Area, two hours south of Gilroy.

It's a hostile landscape, created by a long outcropping of serpentine rock with high concentrations of heavy metals and few essential nutrients. It still bears the scars of the California Gold Rush, when mercury was mined. Its canyons are rumored to have hid the famous bandit Joaquin Murrieta.

But it's home to the rare sulfur buckwheat plant. Well-adapted, the plant thrives in this harsh environment, said Hubner.

Behind locked gates on an old wagon route, Hubner stops the truck. Then he scrambles ahead. There, in abundant clusters by the side of the road, is sulfur buckwheat.

"They're not there until they are," he said, triumphantly, filling envelopes with seeds.

"Then once you find them," he said, "they go on and on."

Mayor

FROM PAGE 1

In San Jose, Mahan will become the city's first new mayor in eight years, replacing Mayor Sam Liccardo, who joined the city's business and real estate interests in endorsing Mahan. He takes the helm at a pivotal time for the 10th largest city in America as Google moves forward with a major campus and housing project downtown and BART is scheduled to make its long-planned push into the core of the city.

Chavez, a Santa Clara County supervisor and San Jose's former vice mayor, was considered a favorite at the start of the campaign but had been fighting an uphill battle since the first ballots were counted Nov. 8. A week later, with about 90% of expected ballots counted, Chavez had fallen further behind. She was down by 6,351 votes with Mahan leading 51.32% to Chavez's 48.68%, when she decided to concede.

In her concession statement, Chavez said she called Mahan "to wish him the best of luck in his two-year term as mayor," referring to a measure voters passed in June to align the city's mayoral election with presidential elections, and perhaps hinting at a Mahan-Chavez rematch in 2024.

"San Jose faces numerous challenges in the months and years ahead," Chavez said in a statement, "requiring that we all work collaboratively with the entire City Council to reach meaningful and equitable solutions."

Mahan in response congratulated Chavez "on her strong campaign" and said he hopes "to work with her closely in the years ahead to address the challenges facing San Jose."



San Jose Councilman and mayoral candidate Matt Mahan speaks to supporters next to his wife, Silvia, at his election night watch party Nov. 8.

The defeat marks Chavez's second loss in a bid for San Jose mayor. She ran in 2006 when she was serving as vice mayor, losing overwhelmingly to Chuck Reed, a sharp critic of then-mayor Ron Gonzales, who was caught up in a scandal over a trash hauling contract at the time. Gonzales' woes were widely seen as a drag on Chavez's campaign that year.

This year's race was much closer, and Chavez seemed to have the advantages in experience, name recognition and money. Though Mahan had the edge in personal campaign funds, for which donors are limited to \$1,400 each per election, Chavez had more funding from independent political committees representing labor and business interests. Combined with her own campaign funds, she had \$5 million behind her effort to Mahan's \$3 million.

"At first blush, one would have expected her to do very well between her name recognition and experience and financial advantage," said Larry N. Gerston, political science professor emeritus at San Jose State University. "That's a combination that usually proves

to be successful."

Mahan seems to have effectively cast his rival as the insider candidate responsible for rising homeless encampments and violent crime, even though, as Chavez would point out in frustration during the campaign, Mahan is the one who's on the City Council now and backed by the outgoing mayor. Gerston said voters saw Chavez as the "de facto incumbent."

"People wanted the city to have a fresh start," Gerston said.

Turnout also may have hurt Chavez's campaign — countywide turnout was listed at 52% as of Wednesday morning. Gerston said that typically means fewer liberal voters who would be expected to align with labor candidates like Chavez. That was one reason behind the city push to align its mayoral races with presidential races. Chavez didn't rule out Wednesday taking another shot at the mayor race, saying "that is a decision that will be made with the input of my family and our community."

But the official measure of turnout — the proportion of registered voters who voted — is misleading with today's universal vote by mail

in which every registered voter is mailed a ballot. Only 180,930 votes were cast in the hard-fought open mayoral race in 2014 in which Liccardo was elected, while more than 240,000 votes have been cast this year.

"While this has been the longest period of vote counting in recent memory, we need to remember that we have also just seen the highest number of votes cast for mayor in our city's history," Mahan said Wednesday.

The race focused on questions of who would best tackle rising violent crime and homelessness. Chavez, a former labor leader and San Jose councilwoman, ran on her experience in elected office, saying San Jose had 200 more officers when she last served, and that while at the county she'd helped improve sex assault case processing and led efforts to pass a \$950 million affordable housing bond.

Mahan, the District 10 City Council member since 2020 and former social media entrepreneur and schoolteacher, said that homeless encampments have proliferated while Chavez focused on expensive and time-consuming long-term affordable housing projects. He said expenses approved when Chavez last served have limited police budgets, while her bail reforms at the county have put too many criminals back out on the streets following arrests.

Mahan expressed hope he can work with Chavez and her supporters now toward his goals.

"We all want our city to be safe, to prosper," he said, "and our mission in the years ahead is to work together for common-sense solutions to end street homelessness, fight crime more effectively, make our city more affordable, clean up San Jose and hold ourselves as elected officials accountable for results."

Bill

FROM PAGE 1

seven Senate Republicans voted no, illustrating that, while polling has found that more than 70% of Americans — including a majority of Republicans — support same-sex marriage, the issue remains politically untouchable for many GOP lawmakers.

The bill would not require any state to allow same-sex couples to marry. But it would repeal the Defense of Marriage Act, which denied federal benefits to same-sex couples. The push to bring it up for a vote began over the summer, after Justice Clarence Thomas suggested in his opinion in the ruling that overturned the 50-year-old Roe v. Wade decision that established abortion rights that the court also "should reconsider" past rulings that established marriage equality and access to contraception.

Some Republicans balked at the move, arguing that marriage-equality rights were not under any immediate threat and that there was no urgency to pass legislation to safeguard those protections.

But Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Wis., the lead sponsor of the legislation, said Wednesday that gay people were "scared for good reason" and that the same legal arguments the Supreme Court rested on to reverse Roe could just as easily be applied to other cases.

"The Supreme Court should not be in a position to undermine the stability of families with the stroke of a pen," said Baldwin, the first openly gay woman to be elected to the House and the Senate, noting that Thomas in his dissent "was essentially providing an open invitation to litigators across the country to bring their cases to the Supreme Court."

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, one of the 12 Republican supporters of the bill, added that even without an imminent threat, "there is still value in ensuring that our federal laws reflect that same-sex and interracial couples have the right to have their marriages recognized regardless of where they live in this country."

The successful vote Wednesday marked an improbable outcome for a measure that was once regarded as a symbolic act by Democrats to show their support in the face of solid Republican opposition that would block it from clearing Congress.

Democrats had initially taken up the measure as an election-year maneuver to show voters that they were doing everything possible to protect same-sex marriage rights in the face of new threats from a conservative Supreme Court. Instead, it passed in the House with

47 Republicans joining Democrats in favor, and a bipartisan group in the Senate began talks on a version that could draw enough Republican backing in that chamber to move forward.

They agreed to add language ensuring that churches, universities and other nonprofit religious organizations could not lose tax-exempt status or other benefits for refusing to recognize same-sex marriages and could not be required to provide services for the celebration of any marriage. They also added language to make clear that the bill does not require or authorize the federal government to recognize polygamous marriages.

The bill now returns to the House, which must pass the revised version before clearing it for President Joe Biden's signature.

The Republican senators who ultimately voted for the measure were: Roy Blunt of Missouri, Richard Burr of North Carolina, Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia, Susan Collins of Maine, Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming, Rob Portman of Ohio, Dan Sullivan of Alaska, Mitt Romney of Utah, Thom Tillis of North Carolina, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, Joni Ernst of Iowa and Todd Young of Indiana.

Deficit

FROM PAGE 1

prepared, that doesn't mean that the decisions to close the coming budget gap won't be difficult — particularly if the economic conditions that have slowed the economy continue, or get worse," he said in an emailed statement.

The current outlook marks a big shift from this past year as California enjoyed an unprecedented surplus of about \$100 billion. Half of that money had to be earmarked for education and other set areas. But the rest allowed Newsom — who signed a budget totaling more than \$300 billion this year — to give money back to Californians in the form of tax refunds, invest in new programs designed to stem homelessness and climate change, and fund infrastructure projects.

Nearly all of that was in the form of one-time spending, rather than ongoing investments — a decision that spurred backlash but now may turn out to be wise. Housing and homeless service providers, for example, said they can't fund the type of long-term solutions that will make a dent in the homelessness crisis with nothing but piecemeal, one-time grants. But experts say it was a fiscally responsible move that helped prepare the state for the coming crunch.

"Had the governor been less prudent, we'd be in big trouble," Regan said.

The downswing stems from the massive inflation the U.S. has suffered as it exited the COVID-19 pandemic — consumer prices rose 8% over the past year, according to the report. The Federal Reserve responded by raising interest rates to combat inflation, making everything from buying a house to getting a car loan more expensive. Now, home and car sales have dropped, stock prices have plummeted and Bay Area tech titans are laying people off in droves.

And it's likely going to get worse. At this point, the odds of the Federal Reserve mitigating inflation without causing a full-blown recession are "narrow," according to the LAO report.

California is especially susceptible to the boom and bust of the economy: When the housing and stock markets are roaring, capital gains fuel the state budget. In downturns, that source of revenue dries up.

That could hinder Newsom's attempts to curtail the homelessness crisis that he's made one of his top priorities, spending about \$15 billion on housing, services and encampment cleanups over the past two years. As the money dries up, it could slow down the state's progress.

"I think this is a time when the rubber really meets the road," said Ray Bramson, chief operating officer for Santa Clara County-based Destination: Home. "When we're in a downturn, are we going to be able to continue to invest? And I hope the answer is yes, because this is the crisis of our time."

A worsening deficit also could spell difficulties for Bay Area mega-projects and transit agencies. Under last year's budget, \$4 billion was promised to transit infrastructure through 2025, although that money has not been allocated. Legislators could seek to claw back those funds, possibly delaying Caltrain's nearly finished electrification project and BART to Silicon Valley.

Beyond mega-projects, transit agencies also are looking to the state to help fill a nearly \$2 billion deficit in their costs to keep buses, ferries and subways running over the next five fiscal years.

The downturn even could impact the political future of the governor, who coasted easily to a second term this month and who experts say likely has presidential ambitions. Patting himself on the back for California's strong economy while campaigning will be harder as the state grapples with a deficit.

Newsom is tasked with proposing an initial budget in January, followed by a revised version in May based on updated economic forecasts. The Legislature then makes its changes, and the governor will sign a final version this summer.

Staff writer Eliyah Kamisher contributed to this report.