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Date: 5/31/2016 8:52:44 AM
Subject: RGPPC Policy & Press



REPUBLICAN GOVERNORS

PUBLIC POLICY COMMITTEE

Policy & Press | May 31, 2016

Energy and Environment

In Weighty Water Ruling, Texas' High Court Backs Landowner ([Governing](#)) - The Texas Supreme Court has strengthened protections for landowners who don't have rights to the water underneath their property. In a ruling Friday, the state's highest civil court said Texas' "accommodation doctrine" should also apply to groundwater, in addition to oil and gas. The decades-old doctrine requires mineral owners — considered the dominant estate — to accommodate the surface owner's existing use of the land if at all possible. While it doesn't always stop drilling or pumping operations, the doctrine gives surface landowners some say regarding the circumstances. But the ruling also establishes that the rights of groundwater owners are dominant over those of surface owners. The decision favors a South Plains ranch, Coyote Lake, which sued the city of Lubbock in 2012 for trying to expand an existing water well field on the 26,600-acre property.

Conservation program at center of energy bill fight ([The Hill](#)) – The long-term fate of a major conservation program could end up being a key sticking point in negotiations over federal energy policy reform. House lawmakers last week appointed members of an energy conference committee, the first step toward finalizing a deal with the Senate on an energy overhaul bill. Democrats support including in a final deal the Senate's long-term extension of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), a popular public lands program. But most House Republicans last week voted to block Democrats' motion to support such an extension. Key Republicans on the energy conference committee have said they'll look to water down efforts to keep the program on the books without major reforms. "The best chance is none at all," House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Rob Bishop (R-Utah) said of potential LWCF provisions in an energy bill compromise.

Transportation and Infrastructure

(Iowa) Higher traffic deaths blamed on distracted, drunken drivers ([The Des Moines Register](#)) - Fatal crashes in Iowa are at their highest level in four years, and state officials suspect that distracted and intoxicated drivers are to blame. Through May 27, there have been 139 fatal crashes across the state, a 28.7 percent increase compared with the same time period last year, according to Iowa Department of Transportation statistics. The last time Iowa had so many fatal crashes this soon in the year was in 2012, when there were 142 fatal crashes through May 27. Alex Murphy, spokesman for the Iowa Department of Public Safety and the Governor's Traffic Safety Bureau, says the state has no "specific analysis of the causes of this increase," but officials have their suspicions of some of the contributing factors. "We continue to see distracted driving, impaired driving and speed among other factors that contribute to the fatality crashes," Murphy said, "but at this time we don't see one single cause for the increase in fatalities in Iowa." State agencies are doing a "more complete analysis" in an attempt to identify patterns that can reduce traffic fatalities, Murphy said.

Michigan bills expand use of driverless cars ([AP](#)) - The U.S. auto industry's home state of Michigan is preparing for the advent of self-driving cars by pushing legislation to allow for public sales and operation — a significant expansion beyond an existing state law that sanctions such vehicles for testing only. While widespread use of driverless cars might be years away, lawmakers and transportation leaders say the technology is progressing so rapidly that Michigan must stay ahead of the curve or risk losing automotive research and development to other states. Under a newly introduced package of bipartisan bills that would update 2013 laws to allow for the operation of autonomous cars on public roads without anyone at the wheel, tight "platoons" of smart commercial trucks could travel in unison at coordinated speeds.

Feds require new safeguards for railroad employees ([The Hill](#)) – The Federal Railroad Administration issued two final rules on Friday to provide added safeguards for employees who work on or near railroad tracks. The set of regulations — which amend an existing rule protecting roadway workers and expand random drug testing for work crews — comes two months after an Amtrak train hit a piece of construction equipment on the tracks near Philadelphia, killing two people. Under the first new rule, a device will be required on railways to signal to a train's operator when workers are on an active railroad; any employee serving as the roadway worker in charge will be required to participate in annual training; and job briefings must include information about the accessibility of the roadway worker in charge.

Public Safety

Georgia governor to bring awareness to leaving children unattended in cars ([The Athens Banner-Herald](#)) - In an effort to heighten awareness about the dangers of leaving children unattended in cars, Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal and several state leaders will gather today in Atlanta to debut a public service campaign to "help save the lives of our state's most vulnerable citizens. "During our state's hot summer months, there is a higher risk of serious injury or death as a result of a child being left alone inside a vehicle," Deal said in a news release. "Since 2010, 11 children in Georgia have died due to vehicular heatstroke. I ask all Georgians to join me in preventing future loss of life by being aware of your surroundings and never leaving a child in a car, even for just a minute. Lives can be saved if we take the time to Look Again."

Foster Care Alternative To Help Mississippi Families In Crisis ([Local Memphis](#)) - Help is on the way for families and children in Mississippi, now that state lawmakers approved the "Supporting and Strengthening Families Act." It was authored by Senator David Parker of Olive Branch. Parker says it provides an alternative to the state's foster care system. Basically it means a parent or guardian could choose someone to legally care for their child for a short period of time without having to go through the state's foster care system. The parent or guardian would be legally allowed to regain custody of their child at any time. "What I'm hoping this will do," said Senator Parker, "is it'll allow that parent to keep their parental rights keep the custody of their child but to get help from someone else for a period of up to one year to get their life back together so they can, you know, continue on as a good parent." This act would benefit parents who need help because of medical or addiction problems, or parents in the military who get called to duty.

North Carolina prisons moving away from solitary confinement ([The News & Observer](#)) – North Carolina prison officials, moving away from the broad use of solitary confinement, have cut in half the number of inmates kept in isolation. Last spring, roughly 5,330 of the state's 38,000 prisoners – 1 in 7 – were segregated from other inmates on any given day. By this month, that number had been reduced to 2,540. State prison officials say solitary confinement is not working and doesn't lead to positive behavioral change. State prison Commissioner David Guice said it is "very much" his goal to end the state's heavy use of solitary confinement.

(Oklahoma) Governor signs 9-1-1 legislation ([The Tulsa World](#)) - Legislation signed into law will reform and shore up the state 9-1-1 system. House Bill 3126, by state Rep. Josh Cockroft and state Sen. Jason Smalley, increases the transparency and accountability for 9-1-1 fees and provides state coordination for improved 9-1-1 service delivery. The measure also replaces the funding that has been lost due to the drop in the use of landline phones with an increase to the individual 9-1-1 fee on each cellular contract. That fee would increase from 50 cents to 75 cents and is estimated to result in approximately \$28 million. Under the legislation, all 9-1-1 operations will be coordinated through a statewide director in the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management. The legislation also requires annual audits and reports from each dispatch center go to the Statewide 9-1-1 State Advisory Board.

Healthcare

States Struggle to Manage Medical Transportation ([Governing](#)) - The dialogue around providing accessible health care includes such big issues as high-priced prescriptions, overuse of emergency rooms and a burgeoning need for long-term care. One topic that gets relatively little attention, but could have a big impact on accessibility, is transportation. It represents a tiny fraction of the total spent on health care, but it has been a big challenge for states to manage. This piece of the health-care puzzle affects 7.1 million people, according to the nonprofit Altarum Institute, which provides health-care research and consulting. A chunk of this group are Medicaid patients. The federal government requires transportation reimbursement for all Medicaid recipients. A report to the 2015 National Conference of State Legislatures described the extent of the overall problem. "Services can overlap in some areas and be entirely absent in others," it said, noting that funding shortfalls, policy and implementation failures, and lack of coordination leave many who need transportation with few or no options.