

California Chrome, Obama, Fresno arsons lead Bee readers' top stories of 2014

- Other top stories in 2014

The other stories that were in contention for the readers' top 10:

- Bruno Mars plays Save Mart Center.
- Derek Carr becomes Oakland Raiders' starting quarterback.
- Chowchilla native Ronald Moore creates hugely successful "Outlander" series for Starz.
- Citrus farmers lose trees to a devastating winter freeze, then see signs that a deadly pest is gaining a foothold in Valley.
- Clovis' population hits 100,000.
- Comatose Fresno woman gives birth to a son.
- Construction begins on two long-discussed Fresno projects, Campus Pointe and Fresno 40.
- For second time in four years, Rep. Jim Costa of Fresno almost loses House seat.
- New Fresno County district attorney: Lisa Sondergaard Smittcamp beats incumbent Elizabeth Egan.
- Fresno, meet an international arms dealer living in town, Ara Dolarian.
- Air tanker crashes while fighting an El Portal fire, killing the pilot.
- Fresno gets first female fire chief, Kerri Donis.
- Fresno's future scrutinized: Mayor Swarengin's pushes to open Fulton Mall to traffic, and her 2035 general plan emphasizes infill projects.
- 25 in the Valley die from the flu.
- Fresno Grizzlies switch affiliation to Houston Astros, ending a 17-year partnership with San Francisco Giants weeks before Giants won third World Series title in five years.
- Hidden Cash craze hits Fresno with frenzied hunts at two city parks.
- High-speed rail plans get boost — demolitions begin and court rulings favor project — as opposition grows.
- Hospital news: It's Valley Children's Hospital, again, amid a fight with Community Regional Medical Centers.
- Many leading figures in Valley take part in Ice Bucket Challenge.
- New Fresno County Superior Court judge: Lisa Gamoian beats Rachel Hill to win open seat.
- Fresno Philharmonic conductor Theodore Kuchar announces he will step down in 2016.

- Navy decides Lemoore will be West Coast home for new fleet of F-35C fighter jets, a boon for local economy.
- Mano Negra, a man alleged to have committed contract killings in small Valley towns, brought to justice.
- Fresno County medical marijuana rules challenged.
- Fresno's Audra McDonald wins sixth Tony Award, setting record for most Tonys of any performer in Broadway history and becoming first to win award in all four acting categories.
- Oakhurst area ravaged by series of wildfires.
- Fresno Grand Opera general director Ron Eichman departs; company merges with Modesto's Townsend Opera.
- Middle schoolers in southwest Fresno get their own campus for first time since 1979 when Rutherford B. Gaston Middle School opens.
- State Center Community College District ousts Chancellor Deborah Blue.
- Fresno Mayor Swearingin runs for statewide office, making relatively good showing in race for controller.
- Four rare Malayan tigers born at Fresno Chaffee Zoo.
- Botched armed robbery caught on video, leading to quick identification and arrest of the suspects, both 17. Both are sentenced to prison.
- Dramatic fire rescue in central Fresno caught on video that gets national attention.
- California voters approve statewide water bond.
- World Cup soccer incites local frenzy for improving U.S. team and Mexico.

The horse from the Valley with the metallic name who proved his mettle. A visit by the president that focused attention on the state's devastating drought. Arsonists who sparked fires that ripped through Fresno — and who may have returned for a second round.

The top stories for 2014, as voted on by readers of fresnobee.com, told of great victory and terrible tragedy, the foibles of human nature and the fragility of life. And some of those stories are yet unfolding: Will the Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino, closed after an armed raid, ever reopen? Will Fresno State's new athletic director help elevate Bulldogs teams to the next level, in addition to reinstating the beloved wrestling program? And will the drought, now in its third year, end anytime soon?

As voted on by readers at fresnobee.com, the Valley's top stories of 2014 are:

1. California Chrome

California Chrome's quest to capture the Triple Crown may have fallen short at the Belmont Stakes, but the chestnut colt won the heart of a nation with "Chromies" everywhere enthralled by his magic on the track.

"It's like he's a person," said Harris Farms owner John Harris. "Chrome's got a great personality that everyone can identify with."

Foaled out of Harris Farms near Coalinga, Chrome — named after flashy white markings on his face and legs — won six times in nine starts this year, including the Kentucky Derby, Preakness, Santa Anita Derby and Hollywood Derby, for total earnings of \$4 million in 2014.

“Chrome’s a really great product of the Valley,” Harris said. “The San Joaquin Valley is established as a place to raise good horses. This horse further solidified that impression.”

On Friday, Chrome won the 2014 Secretariat Vox Populi award and is also in contention for next month’s Eclipse Awards (Horse of the Year), which has molded into a tight three-way contest between Breeders’ Cup Classic winner Bayern and Shared Belief, who on Friday won the Grade 1 Malibu Stakes at Santa Anita Park. Chrome and Shared Belief are the only two horses with four Grade 1 wins in 2014.

After the Eclipse Awards, the three horses are expected to open the 2015 season at the \$500,000 Grade 2 San Antonio Stakes in February.

— Angel Moreno

2. Obama’s Valley visit

President Barack Obama in February took a three-hour tour of the central San Joaquin Valley’s parched west side, hosting a roundtable discussion, visiting farmland and stressing that California’s drought was of national importance because of its agricultural production.

Now, close to 11 months later, there is nothing much of note to be seen from the visit.

The Republican-controlled House passed a far-reaching water bill in February on a largely party-line vote. California Sen. Dianne Feinstein in May then pushed a slimmed-down bill through the Democratic-controlled Senate. Secret negotiations proceeded from that point until they ended in November, though there is hope some sort of compromise can be reached next year.

“There’s never a time limit on helping, so I’m still hoping something can come out of (the Obama visit),” said California Fresh Fruit Association President Barry Bedwell, who took part in Obama’s roundtable discussion.

Thus far, the administration has issued veto threats against House bills and has privately offered reaction to the proposed Feinstein-House compromise. Republican critics say the Obama administration has not been engaged enough.

For his part, Bedwell still hopes another Obama comment during his February visit will get traction — climate change.

“What stuck with me was the president mentioned climate change, and we have not taken the next step to connect the dots,” Bedwell said.

With the passage of an updated water bond in the November election, Bedwell said, now is the time to discuss how the future snowpack may be shrinking, replaced by more rainfall, and the need for new reservoirs to capture that runoff. So far, though, it hasn’t been part of the conversation.

“We’re going to be missing an opportunity,” he said.

— John Ellis

3. Serial arsons in Fresno

Arrests curbed a rash of serial arsons this summer in Fresno — along with a new string that erupted in November, said Don MacAlpine, the city’s deputy fire marshal.

Investigators were carefully studying five subsets of fires this summer that were started by multiple, unrelated arsonists hitting different areas within close proximity and time, which is “pretty unheard of,” MacAlpine said.

MacAlpine said 16 people were arrested for summer arsons. By fall, the serial arsons had come to a “screeching

halt,” but then they struck again from early November to early December, burning 11 vacant structures, he said.

While data still is being analyzed, MacAlpine said last week that a conservative estimate is serial arsonists started 175 to 190 fires — a large percentage in vacant structures — from May through November in Fresno.

Of the November/December serial arson fires, MacAlpine said most were around the 3000 block of East Nevada Avenue in central Fresno. Since the Dec. 3 arrest of Raul Reyes — a 22-year-old homeless man charged with setting one of those fires — there have been no more vacant structure fires with a similar criminal signature, he said. Of those arrested for the summer fires, MacAlpine said, the following suspects were each charged with starting three fires: Efrain Mendoza, 39, and homeless men Carlos Losoya, 42, and Michael Van Valkenburg, 45.

Investigators haven't yet tied suspects to some of the city's highest-profile arson fires, including Procter's Jewelry on the Fulton Mall and a large abandoned packinghouse downtown. A number of factors likely acted as a “catalyst”: a large homeless population, growing opportunity due to a large number of vacant structures and extra dry vegetation, he said.

At first, few witnesses were willing to share information about the fires, MacAlpine said, “but when they started cooperating, we started clearing cases left and right. ... It made all the difference. ... Neighbors linking arms.”

— Carmen George

4. Drought takes toll

The third-driest year on record in California damaged San Joaquin Valley farming, left groundwater levels down 200 feet in some areas and deprived thousands of rural residents of indoor plumbing through a long, hot summer.

Farm losses are expected to be more than \$1.5 billion, according to a [study by the University of California at Davis](#). The study said more than 400,000 acres would be left fallow, leading to the loss of 17,000 seasonal or part-time jobs.

It was the third consecutive year of drought, so groundwater levels continue to drop. Now they are down 200 feet in parts of the west Valley.

As the water is pumped out, the ground is sinking — more than a foot in some areas. The sinking ground threatens to damage canals, dams, roads and buildings. The [nonprofit California Water Foundation in Sacramento](#) has estimated the damage could range up to \$1.3 billion.

The drought got very personal for thousands of rural residents, including in East Porterville, where about 300 wells went dry and more than 1,000 residents had no indoor plumbing. More [than 850 wells have gone dry around Tulare County](#). Many residents cannot afford thousands of dollars for a new well, so they are installing large, refillable water tanks at their homes.

— Mark Grossi

5. 'Braided ramps' ease headaches

Motorists making their way on freeways through central Fresno found themselves getting accustomed to new commuting patterns in 2014 as Caltrans completed almost two years of construction on a new \$49 million interchange linking Highways 41, 168 and 180.

A 1.4-mile stretch of new lanes, bridges and ramps forms a traffic braid to solve what had been a diabolical mess of criss-cross merging, congestion and fender benders over the prior dozen years. A 2010 Caltrans traffic study counted nearly 240 accidents in the area over a three-year period — about one accident every 4 1/2 days, or about 10% more accidents than the state average.

While construction on the \$49 million project also clogged traffic and fomented confusion, vehicles flow better now

than before the work began. “People are still getting used to it,” California Highway Patrol spokesman Axel Reyes said. “The backup of traffic is at different locations, but actually going through it seems a little smoother.”

In both the eastbound and westbound directions on Highway 180, drivers merging onto the highway have their own dedicated ramps crossing over or under lanes for drivers who want to get off the freeway. Drivers going from 41 to 168, or vice versa, have their own lanes spanning the gap without even having to challenge Highway 180 mainline traffic.

Drivers don’t have to fight traffic to reach an offramp, Reyes said. “That’s what created the big backups, when people would slow down to move over, and we’d have some serious accidents when people coming up fast would slam on their brakes.”

— Tim Sheehan

6. Chukchansi raid and closure

It was a tense year for the Picayune Rancheria of Chukchansi Indians, with clashes that forced Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino to close out of safety concerns for visitors and employees.

The year began with two tribal groups battling over control of the Coarsegold casino and tribal offices. The federal Bureau of Indian Affairs ruled in February that its governmental relationship would be with a 2010 tribal council that included members of the Reggie Lewis and Nancy Ayala faction, as well as members of the Morris Reid group, who were suspended by the Lewis/Ayala group after a controversial 2011 tribal election.

By summer, Ayala joined with Lewis, whose group had made amends with Reid’s group. But members on a so-called “unification council” ousted Reid and his followers from council leadership. In August, members of the Lewis/Ayala group took control of the casino by taking over two hotel floors.

In October, the National Indian Gaming Commission ordered the tribe to deliver audits for 2012 and 2013 and threatened to close the casino. Later that week, the McDonald group used members of its armed tribal police force to enter Chukchansi Gold Resort & Casino’s gaming commission office to recover audit data. The McDonald forces clashed with security loyal to Lewis and Ayala. During the takeover, about 500 patrons and employees fled, some leaving winnings in the gaming area.

The following day, citing safety issues, the National Indian Gaming Commission and state attorney general closed the casino. Three weeks later, Madera County District Attorney Michael Keitz filed charges against 15 members of the McDonald security forces, including McDonald and fellow tribal council member Vernon King, who remain jailed. The audits revealed that \$49.6 million went unaccounted.

Criminal court hearings are scheduled in Madera County Superior Court in January. The casino has not reopened as negotiations continue with the federal government, said Richard Verri, a lawyer representing the Lewis/Ayala group. Meanwhile, investors holding bonds will be increasingly concerned about upcoming debt payments if the casino remains closed.

— Marc Benjamin

7. CHP officers killed

Two California Highway Patrol officers died in the line of duty when their cruiser flipped as they approached a crash scene on Highway 99 in Kingsburg on Presidents Day, Feb. 17.

The deaths of officers Juan Jaime Gonzalez, 33, and Brian Mitchio Law, 34, who were close friends as well as graveyard shift partners, prompted an outpouring of grief from the law enforcement community. Their funerals were held at the Save Mart Center on the Fresno State campus. Law enforcement from around the country attended, and

Gov. Jerry Brown, Attorney General Kamala Harris and CHP Commissioner Joe Farrow spoke at the service. San Francisco 49ers Coach Jim Harbaugh sent a letter of condolence, which was read by Farrow.

“I’ve never seen such an outpouring of compassion like this before,” Farrow said. “This has been one of the most humbling experiences of my life. I want this community to know that your acts of kindness, your thoughtful gestures, are truly uplifting and give us strength to carry on. These are the stepping stones that guide us on the path of healing.”

— Jim Guy

8. New Fresno State AD

In an effort to elevate Fresno State’s athletic programs to the next level, President Joseph Castro gave Athletic Director Thomas Boeh the boot and brought in Oregon’s No. 2 guy, Jim Bartko, as his replacement.

Boeh did his job cleaning up the Bulldogs’ reputation that was marred by NCAA violations and Title IX hiccups, but couldn’t muster up the financial support or bridge the proper relationships in line with Castro’s vision to “be bold.”

Bartko, 49, who has spent almost all of his 26-year career at Oregon, was brought in for those specific reasons. He raised more than \$375 million for capital improvements and facilities enhancements, including the Hatfield Dowling Complex, Matthew Knight Arena and John E. Jaqua Academic Center for Student-Athletes. He developed and implemented the Athletic Legacy Fund, which has created a \$140 million endowment, and managed the Duck Athletic Fund, where annual giving increased from \$15.3 million in 2008 to \$19.3 million in 2011.

In all, Bartko’s résumé proves he has the skills to transform vision into reality. Fresno State’s new top dog officially begins his role Jan. 1, where the first of many items on his to-do list will be reinstating Bulldogs wrestling.

— Angel Moreno

9. Bullard bomb scare

The power of social media manifested itself to the Bullard High School community in early September when the threat of a shooting and a bomb scare, along with acts of vandalism at nearby churches and schools, caused panic for parents and students.

The threats led to the arrest of 18-year-old Aaron Nevarez and his 17-year-old brother on vandalism charges. In an unconnected arrest, a 15-year-old who attended a continuation high school was taken into custody after he was linked to the shooting and bomb threats.

Fresno Police Chief Jerry Dyer said quick actions by his officers likely prevented a tragedy at the school. Michael Hanson, superintendent of Fresno Unified School District, called the rapidly unfolding events “insanely complicated.”

The bomb and shooting threats lit up parents’ computers the night of Sept. 3, and about 800 students stayed home the next day, when police arrested Nevarez and his brother in connection with graffiti at St. Anthony of Padua Church, a nearby Mormon church and Baird Elementary School. A group called the “Merry Men” claimed credit for the tagging. Dyer said the Nevarez brothers and their friend Riley Whitsitt made up the group. Police also seized firearms where the brothers lived.

Said Dyer of the younger Nevarez:

“You have someone who is anti-establishment with access to firearms and who is a thrill seeker. ... We may very well have taken someone off the streets before they had the opportunity to do something more damaging.”

In October, Aaron Nevarez pleaded not guilty to a charge of misdemeanor vandalism. Criminal proceedings against his brother are confidential because he was charged as a juvenile.

— Jim Guy

10. Yosemite celebrates 150th

The 150th anniversary of the Yosemite Grant Act — precursor to national parks — marked a time of reflection and celebration in Yosemite National Park, with an array of events in the park and its gateway communities.

The act, signed by President Abraham Lincoln on June 30, 1864, protected the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias, setting the stage for future preservation and the national park system.

There were more than 200 events throughout 2013 and 2014 that celebrated the 150th anniversary, said park ranger Ashley Mayer.

“It was really incredible to see so many people come together to commemorate the establishment of public lands for recreation,” Mayer said. “It was a monumental idea. It was amazing to have the opportunity to reach out to lots of different folks.”

From January through October (the most recent data available), Yosemite welcomed nearly 152,000 more visitors this year than it did during the same period of 2013.

Yosemite is already gearing up for two more important anniversaries: next year, the 125th anniversary of the park’s establishment, and in 2016, the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service.

Those interested in learning more about the 125th anniversary or [how to host an event](#) to celebrate it can check the special Park Service [website](#).

Said Mayer, “There is certainly a lot to look forward to.”

— Carmen George

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