



CARLIN STIEHL Los Angeles Times

A GROUP totes a raft along Kern River for 16 miles to make a point that some stretches often are impassable.

BOATERS WANT THEIR WHITEWATER BACK

A raft is portaged to protest water diverted for hydropower

By Ian James

KERNVILLE, Calif. — It started out like a typical whitewater rafting trip on the North Fork of the Kern River. Boaters paddled through churning rapids, gliding past boulders and crashing through breaking waves.

But after a few miles, as they approached a dam, the group drifted to the bank and lifted their blue raft out of the water to begin an eight-hour journey on land.

Their plan: to hold an unusual protest by carrying the raft on foot for 16 miles beside a stretch of river that is rendered impassable where the dam takes much of its water and reroutes it far downstream.

“That 16 miles of river is not runnable in a boat,” said Jonathan Yates, an avid kayaker who organized the protest. “There’s not enough water in the river.”

As the six boaters set out on the road beside Fairview Dam in late June, about three-fourths of the river’s flow was being diverted into a tunnel and coursing through pipelines that snake along the steep-sided canyon to Southern California Edison’s Kern River No. 3 hydropower plant.

As the diverted water spins turbines to generate electricity, the section of river between the dam and the power plant is often reduced to a shallow stream among boulders.

Yates and other whitewater enthusiasts, including some who run rafting businesses, are demanding changes in the hydroelectric plant’s operations to leave more water in the river. They are calling for measures to ensure flows for boating as Edison seeks to renew its license for the

[See Water, A8]

Crackdown focuses on organized theft rings

L.A. County task force targets thieves as well as the ‘fences’ that sell stolen items.

By MATTHEW ORMSETH

They entered the stores with shopping bags already full and left empty-handed, sometimes counting cash.

Watching the transactions unfold in downtown Los Angeles were plainclothes detectives from the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, who suspected the stores, Quickmart and Big Apple, were buying and reselling stolen goods, according to a search warrant affidavit reviewed by The Times.

When deputies raided the stores in February, they found allegedly shoplifted shaving cream, sunscreen and mouthwash — and \$1 million inside a safe, said Det. Yesenia Olvera, who led the investigation.

Lawyers for the store owners, a married couple, denied wrongdoing and said the cash came from legitimate transactions.

Calling the couple “the embodiment of the American Dream,” their attorneys said the seizure of the money threatened to bankrupt the family, which owns nine convenience stores and gas stations throughout Los Angeles.

But authorities allege the stores are part of a wide network of thieves and brokers who are reaping big profits in Los Angeles County. Serial shoplifters — “boosters,”

[See Theft, A9]

L.A. Zoo’s \$50-million breakup

By NOAH GOLDBERG

In 2022, Robert Ellis pledged \$200,000 to create a garden in the Los Angeles Zoo’s bird theater.

By January, the city of Los Angeles had sued its nonprofit partner, the Greater Los Angeles Zoo Assn., amid long-standing tensions over spending and other issues.

Ellis, a GLAZA board member, redirected his donation to a fund for the nonprofit’s legal fees.

At stake in the messy divorce between the city and the association is a nearly \$50-million endowment that

each side claims is theirs and that funds much of the zoo’s special projects, capital improvements and exhibit construction.

The city’s contract with GLAZA, which governs fundraising, special events and more, ends Tuesday, leaving the zoo in a precarious place, with no firm plan for how to proceed.

The zoo, which houses more than 1,600 animals, has become increasingly dilapidated. Exhibits including the lions, bears, sea lions and pelicans have closed because they need major renovations. The last two elephants, Billy and Tina, recently departed for the

Tulsa Zoo after decades of campaigning by animal rights advocates over living conditions and a history of deaths and health challenges.

The 59-year-old zoo, which occupies 133 acres in the northeast corner of Griffith Park, is struggling to maintain its national accreditation, with federal regulators finding peeling paint and rust in some exhibits.

U.S. Department of Agriculture inspectors and the Assn. of Zoos and Aquariums found a “critical lack of funding and staffing to address even the most basic re-

[See Zoo, A10]

Paramount’s Trump deal nearly fell apart

The \$16-million settlement came after months of high-stakes talks

By MEG JAMES

By early spring, Paramount Global was in crisis. President Trump wouldn’t budge from his demand for an eye-popping sum of money and an apology from the company to settle his lawsuit over a CBS News “60 Minutes” interview with Kamala Harris. Journalists at the storied broadcaster were in revolt against the parent company.

Meanwhile, Paramount’s board faced withering pressure, with a settlement widely seen as a prerequisite for getting government approval for the company’s \$8-billion sale to David Ellison’s Skydance Media, or the deal would collapse.

Then a new emergency erupted.

On May 4, CBS aired a hard-hitting “60 Minutes” segment that took aim at Trump’s targeting of law firms. Correspondent Scott Pelley anchored the report, which relied heavily on an interview with a leading Trump irritant — former top Hillary Clinton advisor Marc Elias.

Trump was furious. He threatened Paramount with an additional lawsuit alleging defamation, according to people close to the situation who were not authorized to comment.

The behind-the-scenes drama eventually would culminate with Paramount agreeing to pay \$16 million to end the president’s battle over edits to October’s Harris interview, which Trump alleged was manipulated to

[See Paramount, A12]

AI’s rise brings layoffs, job fears

By QUEENIE WONG

Tech companies that are cutting jobs and leaning more on artificial intelligence are also disrupting themselves.

Amazon’s Chief Executive Andy Jassy said last month that he expects the e-commerce giant will shrink its workforce as employees “get efficiency gains from using AI extensively.”

At Salesforce, a software company that helps businesses manage customer relationships, Chief Executive Marc Benioff said in late June that AI is already doing 30% to 50% of the company’s work.

Other tech leaders have chimed in. Earlier this year, Anthropic, an AI startup, flashed a big warning: AI could wipe out more than half of all entry-level white-collar jobs in the next one to five years.

Ready or not, AI is reshaping, displacing and creating new roles as technology’s impact on the job market ripples across multiple sectors. The AI frenzy has fueled anxiety from workers who fear their jobs could be automated. Roughly half of U.S. workers are worried about how AI may be used in the workplace in the future, and few think AI will lead to more job opportunities in the long run, according to a Pew Research Center report.

The heightened fear comes as major tech companies, such as Microsoft, Intel, Amazon and Meta cut workers, push for more efficiency and promote their AI tools. Tech companies have rolled out AI-powered features that can generate

[See AI, A10]

COLUMN ONE

Hollywood, CIA have a mutually beneficial bond

Influence often works both ways between the United States’ premier intelligence agency and its entertainment industry

By MICHAEL WILNER
REPORTING FROM LANGLEY, VA.

At CIA headquarters, beyond the handsome granite seal on its lobby floor and a wall of stars carved in honor of the agency’s fallen, experts are at work in the complex tasks of spycraft: weapons-trained officers, computer engineers, virologists, nuclear scientists.

But there are also storytellers, makeup artists, theater majors and ballerinas — Americans who probably never thought their skills would match the needs of a spy agency. Yet the CIA thought otherwise.

Though it rarely gets the spotlight, there’s a revolving door of talent between the country’s premier intelligence agency and its entertainment industry, with inspiration and influence often working both ways.

The agency is targeting professionals at the intersection of arts and technology for recruitment. CIA officers told The Times, and continues to cooperate with entertainment giants to inspire the next generation of creative spies.

This month, the agency is assisting a New York Times bestselling author on a young adult book examining the foundations of the CIA laid during World War II. Scenes from a major upcoming film production were just shot at its headquarters, a logistical feat at an intelligence campus tucked away in the Virginia suburbs behind rings of security perimeters, where officers roam cracking down on Bluetooth signals. Another

[See CIA, A7]



RONALDO SCHEIDT AFP/Getty Images

TEXAS FLOODS KILL DOZENS

At least 32 people have died in flash flooding in the Hill Country, and more than 20 children were reported missing from a summer camp. **NATION, A5**

Angelenos test blood for lead
Times reporter Noah Haggerty joins fire survivors in seeking answers about exposure risks. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

Fans angry over Galaxy’s silence
Supporters, many of them Latino, are unhappy with team for not speaking out against ICE raids. **SPORTS, D3**

Weather
Mostly sunny.
L.A. Basin: 84/61. **B8**

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