



**DEBUNKING GARDEN MYTHS**

Do snails really get drunk on beer?  
**At Home**

**Across dry U.S., drought deepens**

**PARCHED:** Ranchers are suffering, and Great Plains states are frying

By ALYSSA A. BOTELHO  
*The Washington Post*

The drought has intensified in the most parched areas of the country, with more than a fifth of the contiguous United States experiencing "extreme" or "exceptional" drought, according to numbers released Thursday by the National Drought Mitigation Center.

As Congress failed to reach a consensus Thursday on legislation giving disaster relief to ranchers, much of the Great Plains con-

tinued to fry under cloudless skies. Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, Oklahoma and Arkansas are experiencing intensifying drought.

"It's hard to believe that it's getting worse, but it is, even with some rain in the region," said climatologist Brian Fuchs in a statement released by the drought center, which is based at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln.

Just three weeks ago, the portion of the lower 48 states receiving those two most serious drought designations stood at 11.6 percent. That area has now doubled, to 22.3 percent. The jump in the past week from 20.6 percent represents an increase of about 32

See DROUGHT on 6A



Satellite imagery shows Ernesto, center right, by South America.  
 NOAA PHOTO

**5TH NAMED STORM FORMS**

Tropical Storm Ernesto is speeding toward a chain of small, popular vacation islands in the Caribbean Sea. The fifth named storm of the season is expected to strengthen as it moves west. **3A**

**THE PRISON POPULACE DECLINES**

**FLORIDA:** Will fewer inmates and lower crime rates yield savings for the state?

By LLOYD DUNKELBERGER  
*H-T Capital Bureau*

TALLAHASSEE — The surest sign of Florida's plummeting crime rate: For the first time in 28

years, the Sunshine State will have a smaller prison population than it did in the previous year.

The lower number of prisoners and the drop in the crime rate are having a ripple effect throughout the criminal justice system that should ultimately curb rising costs in the \$2 billion-a-year prison system.

Some of that was reflected in the new state budget, which Gov. Rick Scott said contained about \$100 million in "savings," with \$75 million related to closing of operations no longer needed because of less crime and fewer prisoners. Part of that money will be redirected into prevention and rehabilitation programs.

Florida's prison population is now projected to dip below 100,000 by this fall and stay there for the next five years, according to a new criminal justice estimate.

The numbers stood at 100,527 inmates on June 30, compared with 102,319 inmates at the end of June 2011, Florida Department of Corrections data shows.

It is expected to average just above 99,000 inmates for the next five years.

The declining prison population is a sign of a dramatic decrease in Florida's overall crime rate, which peaked in 1991, but has declined by more than half since then, according to analysis by Florida State University's College of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

"The primary driver of the drop in crime in Florida over the last 20 years seemed to be the increasing incarceration rate," said Bill Bales, head of FSU's Center for Criminology and Public Policy Research.

See PRISONS on 7A

2012 SUMMER OLYMPICS DAY SEVEN



**Golden Gabrielle**

Gabrielle Douglas won the women's all-around title Thursday, becoming the third straight American to win gymnastics' biggest prize and the first African-American. The win came two nights after she and her teammates gave the United States its first Olympic title since 1996.

**A 'threepeat' for Phelps**

Michael Phelps became the first male swimmer to win the same individual event at three straight Olympics Thursday, capturing the 200-meter individual medley for his 20th career medal — and 16th gold.

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**INSIDE BUSINESS SHOPPERS SPENDING MORE**  
 Solid sales reports from retailers took some of the sting out of weak June manufacturing data. **1D**

**LOCAL CANDIDATES TALK GROWTH**  
 Two vying for Sarasota County commissioner outline ideas for business growth and regulation. **1B**

**BUSINESS SEEKING WEE-HOUR SALES**  
 McDonald's opens more stores 24 hours for "nocturnivore" dollars. **1D**



**TICKETSARASOTA.COM EATING OUT TONIGHT?**  
 Search over 1,200 restaurants, read Jack Winner's reviews and get the latest restaurant news.

**SNN LOCAL NEWS HORSES AND THE CIRCUS**  
 We explore the institution of the horse in the ring as part of the Suncoast's circus heritage.

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OUR 87TH YEAR  
 NUMBER 303 6 SECTIONS

**Mother asks city to invite FBI in**

**MORRIS CASE:** Officials are also urged to discipline officers who investigated

By LEE WILLIAMS  
[lee.williams@heraldtribune.com](mailto:lee.williams@heraldtribune.com)

BRADENTON BEACH — Dressed in a blue business suit, her voice cracking with emotion, the mother of Sheena Lee Morris stood before the Bradenton Beach City Commission Thursday night and demanded that it call in the FBI to prove what really happened to her daughter in 2009.



Kelly Osborn, facing the camera, hugs Rena Carideo, a close friend of Osborn's daughter, Sheena Morris, who was found hanged on New Year's Day 2009. STAFF PHOTO / THOMAS BENDER

The woman, Kelly Osborn of Tampa, also asked the commission to discipline the two Bradenton Beach police officers she says grossly mishandled the investigation into Morris' death.

Morris, 22, was found hanged in a Bradenton Beach hotel room

on New Year's Day 2009; Bradenton Beach police say she committed suicide.

Osborn and three national forensic experts contend Morris did not kill herself, but rather was murdered, with the scene

See MORRIS on 6A

**ID thefts costing the IRS billions**

By JOSH LEDERMAN  
*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The Internal Revenue Service may have delivered more than \$5 billion in refund checks to identity thieves who filed fraudulent tax returns for 2011, Treasury Department investigators said Thursday. They estimate another \$21 billion could make its way to ID thieves' pockets over the next five years.

The IRS is detecting far fewer fraudulent tax refund claims than actually occur, according to a government audit that warned the widespread problem could undermine public trust in the U.S. tax system. Although the IRS detected about 940,000 fraudulent returns for

See TAX FRAUD on 7A

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**FLORIDA RHYTHM OF THE ROPE**  
 Athletes from 19 nations are competing in jump rope championships in Tampa. **1B**