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Saturday, June 15

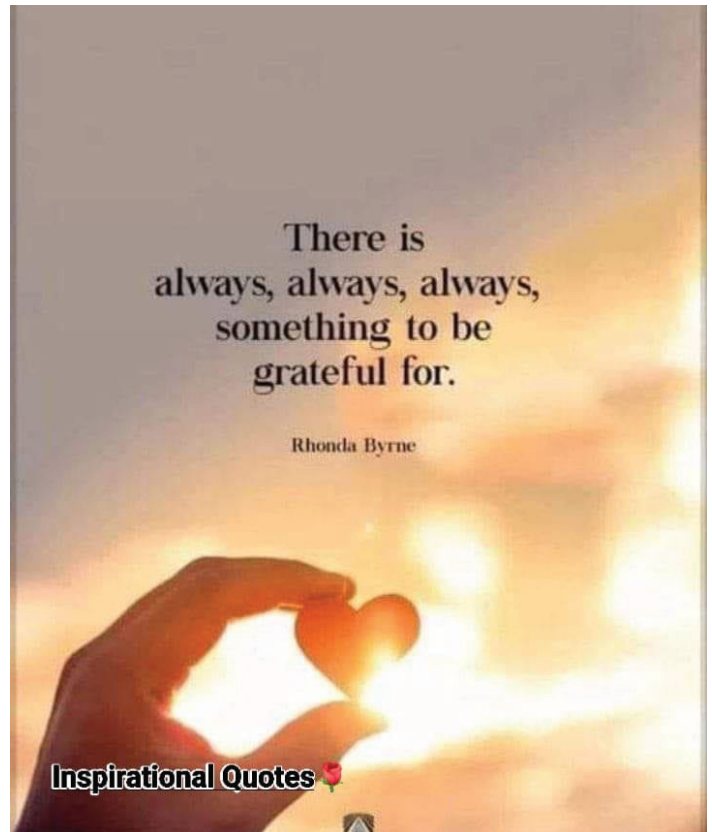
U10 at Milbank Tourney
U12 Tourney at Webster
Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Groton Daily Independent

PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

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Sunday, June 16

U8 Older at Milbank Tourney
United Methodist: Worship at Conde at 8:30 a.m., at Groton at 10:30 a.m., coffee hour at 9:30 a.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion at 9 a.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.
First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.
Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's, 9 a.m., and at Zion, 11 a.m.

1440

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Bump Stocks Ruling

The US Supreme Court yesterday struck down a Trump-era federal ban on a gun accessory, known as a bump stock, that modifies semi-automatic weapons to fire roughly 400 to 800 rounds per minute, a rate nearing that of automatic weapons (700 to 950 rounds per minute).

The court's 6-3 ruling (see here) found the Justice Department exceeded its authority in 2018 when reclassifying rifles modified with bump stocks as machine guns, which are banned under a 1986 law. Justice Clarence Thomas, in writing for the majority, said rifles with bump stocks don't qualify as machine guns, which are defined as being able to fire more than one shot "by a single function of the trigger." Whereas rifles with bump stocks technically involve multiple functions of the trigger, with an individual needing to "release and reset the trigger between every shot."

Bump stocks became illegal following their use in a 2017 massacre at a Las Vegas music festival that killed 60 people—the deadliest mass shooting in US history. At least 15 states currently ban bump stocks.

Catherine, Princess of Wales, offers update on cancer diagnosis.

In a written statement posted to social media, Catherine said she is still undergoing cancer treatment but will make a public appearance today at a ceremony celebrating King Charles' birthday. The public appearance will mark Catherine's first since she underwent surgery in January. The message was accompanied by a new photo of Catherine.

South Africa's ruling party strikes coalition deal with its largest rival.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa was elected to a second term yesterday after his ruling party, the African National Congress, agreed to form a new unity government with its main opposing party, the Democratic Alliance. The deal between the two rival parties is the first such agreement in 30 years and comes after the ANC lost its majority in general elections last month.

Justice Department declines to prosecute Merrick Garland.

The Justice Department said Attorney General Merrick Garland won't be prosecuted for contempt of Congress because his refusal to hand over audio recordings of President Joe Biden's classified documents interview is not a crime. The response comes after the House voted this week to hold Garland in contempt. Biden previously asserted executive privilege in blocking the release of the recordings.

Demolition begins for site of 2018 Parkland school shooting.

Excavation crews started tearing down a building at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, yesterday, six years after the deadliest high school shooting in US history. Fourteen students and three staff members were killed on Valentine's Day, along with 17 others wounded after a shooter opened fire. The families of victims have suggested replacing the building with a memorial.

USA advances to Super 8 stage at cricket's T20 World Cup.

Team USA's advancement comes after its Group A match with Ireland was called off due to the weather in Florida. USA, which is playing in the T20 World Cup for the first time, is seen as the underdog. Team USA will now face South Africa, the West Indies, and either Scotland or England in the tournament's second round next week. The top two teams from that second round group will move on to the semifinals.

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Medical data firm Tempus AI raises \$410M in initial public offering.

Shares of Tempus AI closed up around 9% yesterday after the Chicago-based healthcare diagnostics company debuted on the Nasdaq stock market. Tempus AI has a market value of \$6.1B at its current IPO price.

Humankind(ness)

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Carol F. in Snohomish, Washington.

"My 10-year-old grandson, Uriah, and his best friend, Peyton, have a physical education teacher at their school whom they admire. The two boys found out he needed new tennis shoes so they secretly found out his favorite type, color, and size. The boys took up a collection from the rest of the 4th graders to buy him the shoes. The only rule was it had to be the kids' money and no parents could contribute. In the end, the small 4th grade class gifted the teacher custom Nike Air Force 1s!"

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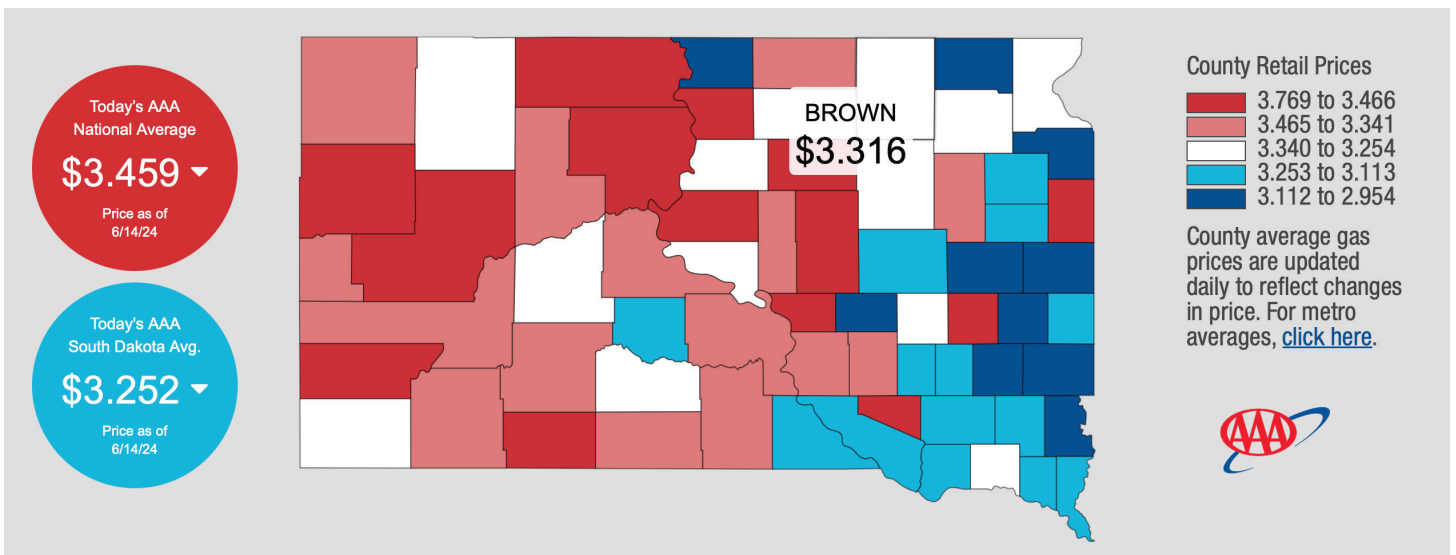
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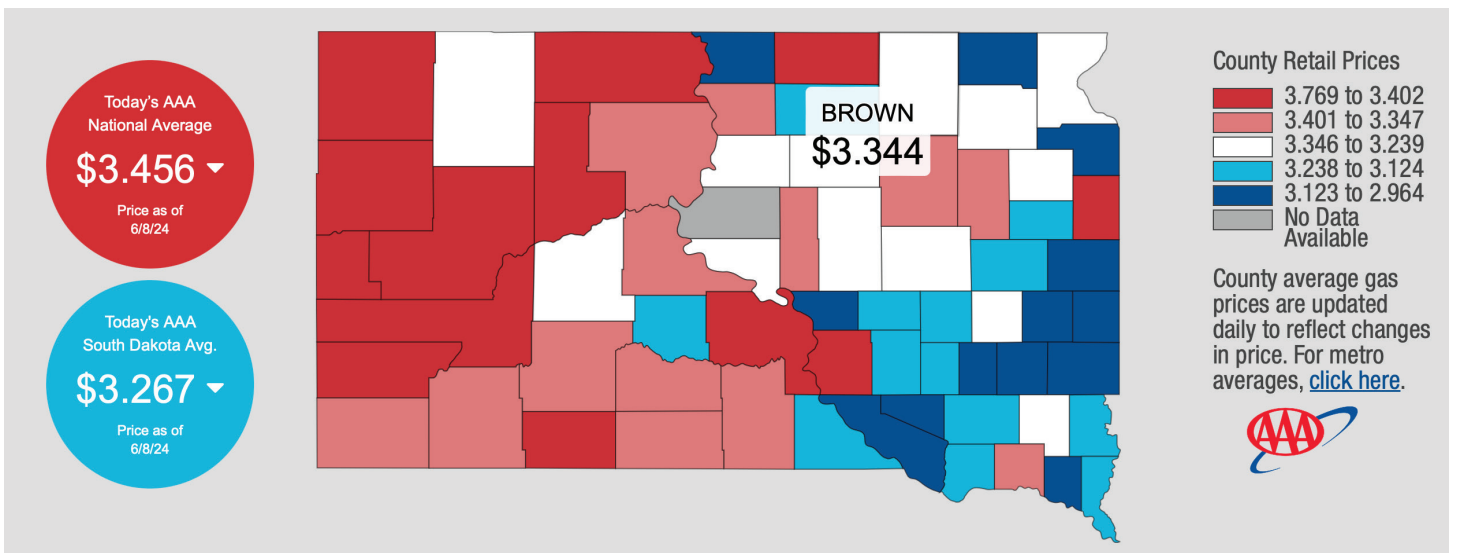
South Dakota Average Gas Prices

| | Regular | Mid-Grade | Premium | Diesel |
|----------------|---------|-----------|---------|---------|
| Current Avg. | \$3.252 | \$3.427 | \$3.859 | \$3.382 |
| Yesterday Avg. | \$3.256 | \$3.436 | \$3.871 | \$3.397 |
| Week Ago Avg. | \$3.278 | \$3.459 | \$3.894 | \$3.437 |
| Month Ago Avg. | \$3.305 | \$3.468 | \$3.896 | \$3.584 |
| Year Ago Avg. | \$3.455 | \$3.609 | \$4.059 | \$3.739 |

This Week



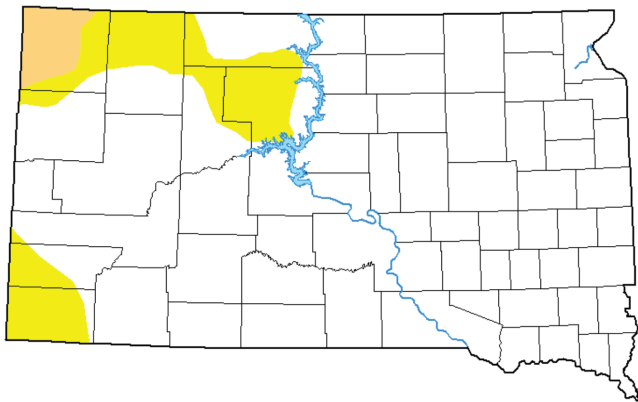
Last Week



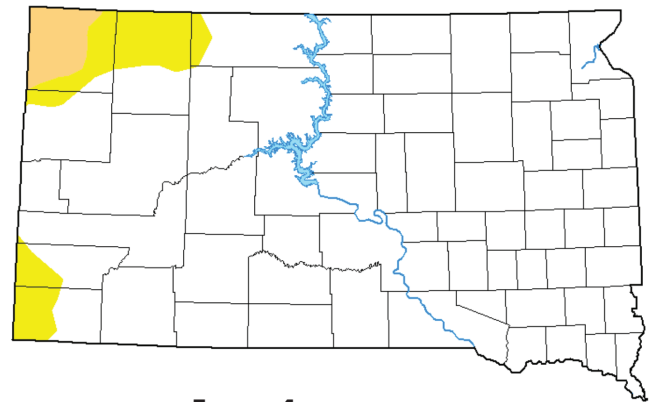
Drought Classification

- None
- D0 (Abnormally Dry)
- D1 (Moderate Drought)
- D2 (Severe Drought)
- D3 (Extreme Drought)
- D4 (Exceptional Drought)
- No Data

Drought Monitor



June 11



June 4

Parts of the southern High Plains Region were hit by heavy to excessive rains, bringing widespread improvement to the entrenched dryness and drought affecting much of Kansas and eastern Colorado. The heaviest amounts soaked a swath across central Kansas, with more scattered heavy rains observed farther north in Kansas and across eastern Colorado. Between 5 and 8 inches fell on central Rice, eastern McPherson, central Marion, and much of Chase Counties in central Kansas, prompting some 2-category improvements there. D3 conditions were eliminated from the High Plains Region, and severe drought (D2) is now limited to a few several-county south and west of the band where the heaviest rains fell last week. Moderate rains (over 1.5 inch) reached into southern Nebraska as well, improving conditions in southeastern Nebraska. Farther north and west, conditions were considerably drier, and most sites recorded several tenths of an inch of rain at best. This kept conditions essentially unchanged in most areas, although some D0 expansion was introduced in north-central Colorado, western Nebraska and adjacent South Dakota, and north-central South Dakota. A dry week also allowed conditions to deteriorate in part of southwestern Colorado, with moderate drought (D1) expanding northward into west-central Colorado. There was an additional, small area of improvement in part of Laramie County in southeastern Wyoming, where a mesoscale heavy rain event (2.0 to 4.5 inches) eased D0 to D1 conditions.

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Groton Transit Fundraiser

Thursday, June 20th, 2024

5:00 pm - 7:00pm at

Groton Community Center

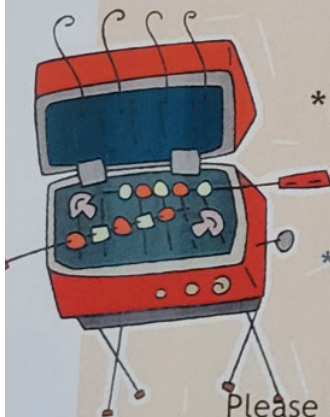
***109 N 3rd Street-One block East of Groton
Transit***

Let us do the cooking for you!!

Burgers, Brats, Beans,
Watermelon, Chips and the
Famous Mini Donuts!!

*Food*Fun*Door Prizes*

FREE WILL DONATION



Please join us & Help support Groton Transit!!

Walk-Off Seals The Deal In Groton Post 39 Victory Over Lake Norden

By GameChanger Media

Groton Post 39 took Friday's game in dramatic fashion, with a 6-5 walk-off victory over Lake Norden. The game was tied at five in the bottom of the eighth when Bradin Althoff singled, scoring one run.

Lake Norden got on the board in the top of the first inning after an error scored one run, and Ryker Warrington singled, scoring two runs.

Groton Post 39 jumped back into the lead in the bottom of the second inning after Ryan Groeblinghoff singled, Brevin Fliehs walked, Dillon Abeln walked, and Colby Dunker walked, each scoring one run.

Jameson Neible was struck by a pitch, which helped Lake Norden tie the game at four in the top of the third.

A ground out by Aiden Abraham gave Lake Norden the lead, 5-4, in the top of the fourth.

Braxton Imrie singled, which helped Groton Post 39 tie the game at five in the bottom of the fifth.

Groeblinghoff pitched three innings in relief for Groton Post 39. The reliever gave up one hit and zero runs while, striking out three and walking one. Abeln started the game for Groton Post 39. The right-handed pitcher surrendered six hits and four runs (two earned) over two and one-third innings, striking out four and walking one. Lane Tvedt stepped on the bump first for Lake Norden. The starting pitcher surrendered three hits and four runs (two earned) over four innings, striking out two and walking eight.

Althoff, Groeblinghoff, Imrie, Karsten Fliehs, Fliehs, and Carter Simon each collected one hit for Groton Post 39. Althoff, Abeln, Imrie, Dunker, and Fliehs each drove in one run for Groton Post 39. Groton Post 39 had a strong eye at the plate, collecting eight walks for the game. Abeln and Dunker led the team with two bases on balls each. Groton Post 39 turned one double play in the game.

Warrington provided pop in the middle of the lineup, and led Lake Norden with two runs batted in. The first baseman went 2-for-5 on the day. Abraham and Warrington were a force together in the lineup, as they each collected two hits for Lake Norden while hitting back-to-back.

Groton Post 39 will travel to Battle of Omaha for their next game on Monday.

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Lake Norden **5 - 6** Groton Post 39

📍 Home 📅 Friday June 14, 2024

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | R | H | E |
|------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| LKNR | 3 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 8 | 6 |
| GRTN | 0 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 6 | 4 |

BATTING

| Lake Norden | AB | R | H | RBI | BB | SO |
|--------------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|
| L Tvedt (P, SS) | 5 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| D Noem (SS, C) | 4 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| G Jenson (CF) | 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| C Rodriguez (C, P) | 4 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| R Warrington (1B) | 5 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| A Abraham (3B) | 4 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| K Fast (LF) | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| J Neible (2B) | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| J Mata (RF) | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Totals | 35 | 5 | 8 | 4 | 5 | 10 |

2B: R Warrington, **3B:** L Tvedt, **TB:** R Warrington 3, A Abraham 2, G Jenson, L Tvedt 3, K Fast, D Noem, **HBP:** J Neible, **SB:** D Noem, **LOB:** 12

PITCHING

| Lake Norden | IP | H | R | ER | BB | SO | HR |
|---------------|------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| L Tvedt | 4.0 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 8 | 2 | 0 |
| C Rodriguez | 3.2 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| Totals | 7.2 | 6 | 6 | 2 | 8 | 5 | 0 |

P-S: L Tvedt 96-41, C Rodriguez 62-44, **WP:** L Tvedt, **HBP:** L Tvedt, **BF:** L Tvedt 25, C Rodriguez 18

| Groton Post 39 | AB | R | H | RBI | BB | SO |
|-----------------------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| B Flihs (SS, P, S...) | 4 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| D Abeln (P, SS, 2...) | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| B Althoff (1B) | 4 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| C Dunker (LF) | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| G Englund (P, 3B) | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| C Simon (3B, RF) | 4 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| R Groeblinghoff (...) | 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| K Flihs (C) | 4 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| B Imrie (RF, 2B) | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| T Diegel (CF) | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| N Morris | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Totals | 33 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 8 | 5 |

TB: B Althoff, R Groeblinghoff, B Imrie, K Flihs, C Simon, B Flihs, **SAC:** D Abeln, **HBP:** D Abeln, **LOB:** 11

| Groton Post 39 | IP | H | R | ER | BB | SO | HR |
|--------------------|------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| D Abeln | 2.1 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 4 | 0 |
| B Flihs | 0.2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| G Englund | 2.0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 |
| R Groeblinghoff... | 3.0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 0 |
| Totals | 8.0 | 8 | 5 | 2 | 5 | 10 | 0 |

P-S: G Englund 31-17, R Groeblinghoff 41-30, B Flihs 24-10, D Abeln 45-31, **HBP:** B Flihs, **BF:** G Englund 8, R Groeblinghoff 12, B Flihs 6, D Abeln 15

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**BROWN COUNTY
BROWN COUNTY COMMISSION AGENDA
REGULAR MEETING TUESDAY**

June 18, 2024 8:45 A.M.

COMMISSIONER'S CHAMBERS, COURTHOUSE ANNEX - 25 MARKET STREET, ABERDEEN SD

1. Call To Order - Pledge of Allegiance
2. Approval of Agenda
3. Scott Meints, Emergency Management Director – Award Presentation for a Citizen
4. Opportunity of Public Comment
5. Marla Kiesz, Executive Director for Area IV Senior Nutrition
 - a. Program Update and FY 2025 Budget Request
6. First Reading of the following Ordinances:
 - a. Ord. #271 – Rezone
 - b. Ord. #272 – Rezone
7. Approve & Authorize Chairman to sign 2024-2025 Roberts County Jail Contract
8. Approve Resolution to Create a County Road & Bridge Levy
9. Approve & Authorize Chairman to sign Resolution for SDPAA Board Member, Commissioner Wiese
10. Consent Calendar
 - a. Approval of General Meeting Minutes of June 11, 2024
 - b. Claims/Payroll
 - c. HR Report
 - d. Lease Agreements
 - e. Travel Request
11. Other Business
 - a. NECOG Survey
12. Executive Session (if requested per SDCL 1-25-2)
13. Adjourn

Brown County Commission Meeting

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Access Code: 601-168-909 #

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Public comment provides an opportunity for the public to address the county commission but may not exceed 3 minutes.

Public comment will be limited to 10 minutes (or at the discretion of the board).

Public comment will be accepted virtually when the virtual attendance option is available.

Official Recordings of Commission Meetings along with the Minutes can be found at

<https://www.brown.sd.us/node/454>

2025 Budget Work Session following the Commission Meeting

Charles Mix County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash
Where: 401st Ave and 290th Street, five miles south of Delmont, SD
When: 7:16 a.m. Friday, June 14, 2024

Driver 1: Male, 19, fatal injuries
Vehicle 1: 2012 Ford Escape
Seatbelt Use: No

Charles Mix County, S.D.- A 19-year-old man died this morning in a single-vehicle crash near Delmont, SD.

The name of the person involved has not been released pending notification of family members.

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 2012 Ford Escape was traveling southbound on 401st Ave near 290th Street. For an unknown reason, the vehicle left the roadway, vaulted over a field approach and rolled, ejecting the driver who was found deceased at the scene.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.

Name Released in Beadle County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash
Where: US Highway 281, mile marker 135, two miles north of Bonilla, SD
When: 8:16 p.m. Friday, June 7, 2024

Driver 1: John Martin Wenzel, 66-year-old male from Huron, SD, fatal injuries
Vehicle 1: 2022 Indian Motorcycle
Helmet Use: Under investigation

Beadle County, S.D.- A 66-year-old man died Friday evening, June 7, in a single-vehicle crash near Bonilla, SD.

Preliminary crash information indicates John M. Wenzel, the driver of a 2022 Indian motorcycle was traveling south on US 281. Wenzel entered the southbound shoulder and lost control of the motorcycle and entered the west ditch. He was taken to a regional medical center where he was pronounced deceased.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.



Recreational pot support cools, poll shows

BY STU WHITNEY

South Dakota News Watch

Most South Dakotans oppose the latest attempt to legalize recreational marijuana in the state, according to a scientific poll of 500 registered voters co-sponsored by South Dakota News Watch.

The statewide survey, also sponsored by the Chiesman Center for Democracy at the University of South Dakota, showed that 52% of respondents are against Initiated Measure 29, compared to 42% who support it and 7% who are undecided.

The rate of opposition is consistent with a similar measure's defeat in the 2022 election, when South Dakotans voted against legalizing recreational marijuana by a margin of 52% to 47%.

But the level of support has dropped, according to the poll, creating a sizable deficit at a critical time when ballot measure committees are raising money and building strategies for the November 2024 election.

"We believe that the level of support among voters for Measure 29 is higher than the figure in this latest poll," said Matthew Schweich, executive director of South Dakotans for Better Marijuana Laws, whose group spearheaded the petition effort.

Schweich points to the last presidential election in 2020, when pro-legalization Amendment A passed with 54% of the vote, clearing the way for recreational marijuana to be implemented in the state. Medicinal pot was also approved by voters that year in an initiated measure.

Gov. Kristi Noem's administration challenged the 2020 recreational marijuana effort, saying it violated the state's requirement that constitutional amendments deal with just one subject. That argument prevailed in a 4-1 decision at the South Dakota Supreme Court.

"It's difficult to explain how support could have dropped 12 percentage points in just four years," said Schweich. "That type of rapid decrease in public support for cannabis legalization has not occurred in other states."

GOP, Catholic leaders oppose measure

In a Pew Research Center poll conducted in January, 57% of Americans said that marijuana should be legal for medical and recreational purposes, while roughly a third (32%) said that marijuana should be legal for medical use only.

But a 2022 News Watch/Mason-Dixon poll of South Dakota voters found that 54% opposed the measure to legalize recreational pot. That poll number was 2 points off the final election tally (52%) as the measure was defeated that year.

Mason-Dixon Polling and Strategy conducted the 2024 survey on May 10-13. Those interviewed were selected randomly from a telephone-matched state voter registration list that included both landline and cellphone numbers. Quotas were assigned to reflect voter registration by county. The margin of error is plus or minus 4.5 percentage points.

Initiated Measure 29 would allow people 21 and older to "possess, grow, ingest, and distribute marijuana or marijuana paraphernalia." Possession would be allowed up to 2 ounces in a form other than marijuana concentrate or other marijuana products.

The poll showed that the measure is opposed by nearly 7 in 10 Republicans (68%) in the state, compared to 24% of Democrats and 45% of non-affiliated voters.

The South Dakota Republican Party, at its 2024 convention June 6-8 in Pierre, passed a resolution that urged "all party members and Republican organizations to lend whatever practical support they can to assist in the campaign to defeat Initiated Measure 29."

In a joint statement released June 6, the bishops of South Dakota's two Catholic dioceses also formalized

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their opposition to the measure, saying that marijuana “contributes to a host of problems that weaken the social fabric of society.”

South Dakotans ‘fiercely protective’

Recreational marijuana is legal in 23 states and the District of Columbia, with supporters pointing to economic advantages to the state economy from tax revenue. States collected nearly \$3 billion in marijuana revenues in 2022, according to the Tax Foundation.

Opponents cite potential social costs and health risks such as a higher risk of cardiovascular problems from marijuana use, as outlined in a recent study in the Journal of the American Heart Association.

Protecting South Dakota Kids, a campaign committee formed to fight recreational pot legalization in 2022, will actively oppose the effort again in 2024, said Rhonda Milstead, a former Republican state legislator who serves as the group’s executive director.

“When it comes to our children, South Dakotans are fiercely protective,” Milstead told News Watch. “We say no to any group selling addiction for profit.”

Most experts characterize marijuana as a drug that can be used responsibly but also poses risks if abused, like alcohol and other intoxicants.

Expanded legalization has led to more usage, not just among adults. A federal government survey conducted in 2019 found that an estimated 32 million people aged 12 or older in the U.S. had used marijuana in the previous month, up from 22 million five years earlier.

‘The debate has already been had’

The pro-legalization petition drive was funded primarily by the Grow South Dakota Ballot Committee (with former state legislator Deb Peters as treasurer) and Puffy’s Dispensary, a West River-based medical cannabis operation.

Schweich acknowledged the potential of voter fatigue on an issue that will be on the South Dakota ballot for a third consecutive election cycle.

He told News Watch that he made a political miscalculation by going back to the issue in 2022 rather than “taking a breather” and waiting for 2024, a presidential election year with higher voter turnout than midterms.

“My theory was that the anger over the amendment being overturned would cause a whole bunch of voters who might not otherwise show up for the midterms to go out and vote,” said Schweich, who also runs Eagle Campaigns, a political campaign service in Sioux Falls. “It was an ambitious theory, and unfortunately things didn’t play out that way. It turns out that changing an electorate is very difficult.”

This time, South Dakotans for Better Marijuana Laws will focus on get-out-the-vote efforts rather than trying to win “the hearts and minds” of voters on an issue that they are well-versed on following the 2020 and 2022 campaigns.

“We need to have a meaningful impact on the electorate in terms of who shows up at the polls,” Schweich said. “In a lot of ways, the debate has already been had. Our fate will be determined by the strength of our ground game.”

Sioux Falls voters oppose legalization

As expected, the News Watch/Chiesman poll showed that the youngest group surveyed (ages 18-34) was the most supportive of South Dakota’s recreational pot measure. But that age group polled even at 48% for and 48% against.

That’s a concern for Schweich and his group as they look for a strong base to lean on as the campaign seeks momentum. The 35-49 age group was at 45% support, while the 50-64 and 65-plus groups were at 38%.

Another red flag for supporters is the fact that the poll showed 41% of Sioux Falls area respondents for the measure and 53% against. Minnehaha County was a stronghold for legalization efforts the past two cycles, with 60% voting yes to the 2020 amendment (which included medical marijuana) and 54% supporting the 2022 initiative.

Elsewhere in the state, West River respondents were most likely to oppose the measure (54%), while

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those designated East River/South were 48% for and 48% against.

The gender breakdown showed female respondents 44% supporting and 48% opposed, compared to 39% supporting and 56% opposed among male voters.

Those respondents who said they plan to vote for President Joe Biden in the 2024 election were 58% in favor of the legalization measure, compared to 37% against. Those supporting Republican nominee Donald Trump were 29% for the measure and 64% against.

Government looks to reclassify pot

The federal government is taking steps to reclassify marijuana as a less dangerous drug, moving it from the Schedule I group (heroin, LSD, ecstasy) to the less tightly regulated Schedule III (ketamine, anabolic steroids).

The review was initiated by Biden, who supports legalizing medical marijuana for use "where appropriate, consistent with medical and scientific evidence," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said.

Most of the changes involve freeing up medical marijuana for clinical trials and easing regulation of taxation for marijuana-related businesses, Schweich said.

"I don't think the proposed rescheduling will have a significant impact on our ability to pass Initiated Measure 29," he told News Watch. "It's a fairly modest change and doesn't alleviate the stigma. There will be positive effects from the standpoint of businesses in South Dakota, but I don't think it has a main-stream political effect."

Other 2024 ballot measures (not polled)

Work requirement for Medicaid

Legislators also passed Senate Joint Resolution 501 during the 2024 session, an effort to amend the constitution to impose work requirements for Medicaid eligibility.

Supporters want to add a work requirement for adults who are not physically or mentally disabled but who are eligible for Medicaid under the expansion of the government-sponsored program that South Dakota voters approved in 2022. The move would still need to be approved by the federal government.

Opponents frame it as a rebuke of the will of voters and cite the state's 2.1% unemployment rate, which ranks second-lowest in the nation. "Who is on Medicaid and is not working? I can answer that for you, it's the poorest of the poor," said Democratic Rep. Kadyan Wittman of Sioux Falls.

References to government officials

This is a legislative resolution from the 2023 session that proposes to change outdated male-only references to South Dakota's governor and other officials in the state constitution and statutes. It's a procedural update in language that shouldn't draw too much opposition, if any.

The Associated Press contributed to this story, which was produced by South Dakota News Watch, an independent, nonprofit news organization. Read more in-depth stories at sdnewswatch.org and sign up for an email every few days to get stories as soon as they're published. Contact Stu Whitney at stu.whitney@sdnewswatch.org

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National and South Dakota Legislative News Connection

Washington- Representatives Dusty Johnson (R-SD.) and Sharice Davids (D-Kan.) announced the launch of the Congressional Sustainable Aviation Caucus. The CSAC will help lawmakers remain informed about initiatives to improve the sustainability of aviation, including the development and use of sustainable aviation fuel. The Caucus will provide a forum for moving forward with sustainability goals and aspirations by adopting sustainable aviation fuel through integrating technology to improve the fuel efficiency of aircraft and reduce emissions.

The Office of Energy Efficiency & Renewable Energy estimates the U.S. produces 1 billion dry tons of sustainable biomass each year, enough to produce 50-60 billion gallons of low-carbon fuels. These resources include corn grain, oil seeds, algae, other fats, oils and greases, agriculture residues, forestry residues, wood mills waste, municipal solid waste streams, manures and wastewater treatment sludge, and dedicated energy crops.

Members of the Congressional Sustainable Aviation Caucus include Rep Sharice Davids (D-KS-03) Co-Chair, Rep. Dusty Johnson (R-SD-AL)-Co-Chair, Rep. Mike Flood (R-NE-01), Rep. Nikki Budzinski (D-IL-13), Rep. Salud Carbajal (D-CA-24) and Rep. Troy Carter (D-LA-02).

Right to Repair- John Deere now allows its equipment owners to use independent repair shops to repair emission control devices and other equipment systems. Before this decision, Deere, along with many other equipment manufacturers, required equipment owners to use Deere-certified repair shops for most equipment repairs. The decision comes after Deere received warnings from the EPA about potential violations of the Clean Air Act. In response to the EPA violations, Deere recalled equipment owner's manuals and sent letters to equipment owners notifying them that they are allowed to use a repair shop of their own choice to maintain or repair emission control devices. More information can be found under the NALC article "Right to Repair."

South Dakota News

Washington- U.S. Senator Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) and Senator Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) introduced legislation that would require the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) to consider consequences for rural areas to protect rural processing facilities. The introduced legislation would require USPS to consider the impact on rural areas when closing or downsizing processing centers, just as they do with closing post office retail locations.

In February 2024, the USPS finalized a plan to move all non-local processing at the Huron facility to Fargo, North Dakota. This was followed up in April with the USPS announcement of moving all non-local processing at the Sioux Falls facility to Omaha, Nebraska. USPS announced in May that it is pausing the downsizing of mail processing facilities in South Dakota after a letter from S.D. congressional legislators was sent.

The new legislation is cosponsored by Senators Martin Heinrich (D-N.M.), Tina Smith (D-Minn.), Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), Roger Wicker (R-Miss), Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.) and Kevin Cramer (R-N.D.)

South Dakota Planting & Production Progress

According to an updated news release from the National Agricultural Statistic Service (USDA, Northern Plains Region) the current percentages across South Dakota:

Corn Planted- 99% up from 94% the previous week

Corn Emerged- 93% up from 68% the previous week

Corn Condition- 2% poor, 15% fair, 71% good, 12% excellent

Soybean Planted- 95% up from 75% the previous week

Soybeans Emerged- 78% up from 34% the previous week

Soybean Condition- 2% poor, 18% fair, 70% good, 10% excellent

Winter Wheat Headed- 63% up from 22% the previous week

Winter Wheat Condition- 2% very poor, 4% poor, 20% fair, 54% good, 20% excellent

Pasture and Range Condition- 3% very poor, 5% poor, 19% fair, 56% good, 17% excellent

Days Suitable for Field Work- 5.9 up from 5.1 the previous week

Topsoil Moisture Condition- 5% very short, 10% short, 74% adequate, 11% surplus



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COMMENTARY

The unsaid words that matter most in Noem's feud with tribes

by KEVIN WOSTER

JUNE 14, 2024 1:05 PM

Words matter. And for Gov. Kristi Noem and her relationship with Native American tribes, two words could matter most of all: "I'm sorry."

I've been thinking about the importance of apologies and their potential value to state-tribal relations since the Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe decided to ban the governor from tribal lands.

Flandreau was the ninth of nine South Dakota tribes to impose such a ban, which should lead Noem to some pretty serious introspection. I mean, if one or two tribes give you the boot, you might be able to convince yourself that it's them. But nine out of nine? Most reasonable people would conclude that it's time to reassess.

And Noem has reason to reassess, and apologize. She has made some positive outreach to the tribes in some areas but has too often flubbed in others. One of the most damaging flubs was reported by South Dakota Searchlight in March when Noem spoke at a town hall in Mitchell. Noting the high unemployment rates on reservations, Noem said: "Their kids don't have any hope. They don't have parents who show up and help them. They have a tribal council or a president who focuses on a political agenda more than they care about actually helping somebody's life look better."

Sure, hope can be hard to find in poverty stricken areas. The problems are well known. But I've covered the reservations for many years and met many Indigenous youth who have hope and believe in themselves and their futures. I believe in them, too.

And, sure, some parents on the reservations might not show up for their kids as they should. Plenty of others do, however, sometimes in heroic, inspirational ways.

Some tribal leaders might focus, as Noem said, more on politics than helping their people. Many others, however, are working hard for their people against challenges that must sometimes seem insurmountable.

Broad-brush rhetoric is usually unfair and often harmful. But Noem wasn't finished using it about tribal officials.

The "crisis" at this nation's border with Mexico is a go-to point of rhetoric these days for many Republican politicians, including Noem. Especially Noem, maybe, since she has been pushing so hard for a spot on the Donald Trump team.

Noem interweaves her "war zone" rhetoric about the border (ask someone who lived through combat at Normandy or Khe Sanh or Fallujah how the Mexican border compares as a war zone) with claims about drug cartels operating on reservations in South Dakota.

And she did more than just say tribal leaders are failing to address the problem.

"We've got some tribal leaders that I believe are personally benefitting from the cartels being here, and that's why they attack me every day," Noem said.

That's Noem doubling down in a Trump sort of way. If you're attacked, or even just feel like you're attacked, attack back, harder. And in this case it was a broad attack of sinister insinuation without offering a speck of proof.

That's an awful way to communicate, especially with Indigenous people who have suffered through generations of abuse and neglect from non-tribal governments and their leaders.

The wounds are deep and understandable. Healing takes time, and trust.

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Indigenous people have rich oral traditions. So words carry great weight and power. They can hurt, as Noem's words did, or they can help. And no two words are more helpful than "I'm sorry."

I used those words on the Rosebud Reservation back in 2016 when I was working for KELO-TV and covering a sensitive story about a 22-year-old Rosebud man who was shot and killed by a tribal police officer.

Before I set up the camera and microphone and started to do interviews with members of the man's family, I took time to offer my sympathy but also to acknowledge that sometimes the news business had failed Indigenous people in its coverage. I said sometimes I had failed Indigenous people myself. I apologized for that and said I was committed to doing better.

After the interviews, family members came up and shook my hand and said how much they appreciated my words of apology. After that I did the same thing a number of other times while covering stories on the reservation, with similar responses.

And, in the process, I made some relationships that mattered beyond the news.

All because of those two words: "I'm sorry."

Some tribal leaders have already suggested that an apology from the governor could help improve state-tribal relations. She messed up in her rhetoric. We all make mistakes. We should all have a chance to redeem ourselves.

But redemption starts with admitting mistakes and showing some humility. Doubling down won't work with tribal leaders and Indigenous people. And it shouldn't work. They've had generations of that. They deserve better.

When then-Gov. George Mickelson began reconciliation work with tribal leaders in South Dakota in 1990, humility was one of his greatest assets.

Pope Francis took a similar sense of humility when he went on a "penitential pilgrimage" to Canada two years ago to apologize for the Catholic Church's role in operating boarding schools that abused Indigenous children. Francis said "I'm sorry," but also went further and said "I humbly beg forgiveness" for the evils some Catholics committed at those schools.

The apology was just part of the church's broader reconciliation work with Indigenous people in Canada and elsewhere. That work still has a long way to go, but apologies are a crucial beginning.

I don't expect Gov. Noem to humbly beg the forgiveness of tribal leaders for her rhetoric. But I hope she can find the courage and humility to offer them those simple-but-powerful words: "I'm sorry."

Who knows where the conversation could go from there.

Kevin Woster grew up on a farm near Reliance and worked for decades as a journalist, including stops at the Brookings Register, Sioux Falls Argus Leader, Rapid City Journal, KELO-TV and South Dakota Public Broadcasting, plus freelance assignments for outdoors and agricultural magazines. He lives in Rapid City.

Biofuel plants a significant source of air pollution in Midwest, study finds

BY: CHRISTOPHER INGRAHAM - JUNE 14, 2024 11:01 AM

A report out this week finds that biofuel refineries, which are overwhelmingly concentrated in the Midwest's corn-producing states, emit significant amounts of compounds that foul the air and threaten public health.

The study was produced by the Environmental Integrity Project, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C. It finds that the total quantity of air pollutants released by the nation's biofuel refineries adds up to 12.9 million pounds annually, close to the 14.5 million pounds emitted by traditional oil refineries.

The data in the report comes from emissions inventories maintained by the Environmental Protection Agency.

One of the emitted pollutants is formaldehyde, a toxic compound used, among other things, to prevent corpses from decaying. It's also a widely recognized carcinogen, especially when emitted in gaseous form.

The nation's biofuel plants reported more than 235,000 pounds of formaldehyde emissions in 2022, more

than three times the amount released by petroleum refineries.

"Despite its green image, the biofuels industry releases a surprising amount of hazardous air pollution that puts local communities at risk – and this problem is exacerbated by EPA's lax regulation," said Courtney Bernhardt, director of research for the Environmental Integrity Project.

There are at least 226 biofuel plants in the country, according to the report, including 21 in Minnesota, mostly in the southwest quadrant of the state.

In 2022 those plants emitted roughly 715,000 pounds of hazardous pollutants, with the majority coming from the Minnesota Soybean Processors biodiesel facility in Brewster. Minnesota's ethanol refineries also produced the equivalent of 2 million metric tons of carbon dioxide, and nearly 3 million tons of other regulated air pollutants including lead, sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides and particulate matter.

"Biofuel factories release surprisingly large amounts of hazardous air pollution, often into rural Midwestern communities that suffer from unhealthy air quality despite having no significant pollution sources around them, other than the smokestacks of ethanol refineries," the report concludes.

Those emissions undercut the industry's carefully-crafted image as a "green" alternative to traditional, petroleum-based fuels. Scientists are increasingly concluding that crop-based ethanol may actually be worse for the climate than regular gasoline once a full accounting of emissions associated with its production is made.

Roughly 5% of the total surface area of Minnesota — more than the land taken up by every town, city and road — is used to grow corn for ethanol production.

The report faults the EPA for subjecting ethanol plants to less stringent emission standards than regular oil refineries. The authors also call on policymakers to eliminate the mandates and subsidies for ethanol production that prop up the industry.

"Biofuels are growing at a rapid rate in part because of government funding and regulatory mandates for blending ethanol into gasoline," the authors write. "But the environmental benefits of these government supports are questionable at best."

Christopher Ingraham covers greater Minnesota and reports on data-driven stories across the state. He's the author of the book "If You Lived Here You'd Be Home By Now," about his family's journey from the Baltimore suburbs to rural northwest Minnesota. He was previously a data reporter for the Washington Post.

Official shares data on South Dakota's multi-family housing spree, tight labor market

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - JUNE 14, 2024 8:05 AM

Six thousand five hundred new housing units worth \$1.4 billion were built in South Dakota last year, a state economic development official said Wednesday, helping alleviate rising home costs.

"Our building permits are notably concentrated on multi-family housing, with an average of 1.8 units per building," Joe Fiala with the Governor's Office of Economic Development told members of the South Dakota Board of Economic Development. "That's the sixth highest ratio in the nation."

In April, Dakota Institute Chief Executive Officer and economist Jared McEntaffer said communities should speed up the construction of multifamily housing units to mitigate the state's "unheard of" rise in home values.

The median home price in South Dakota rose by an inflation-adjusted 26% from Q2 2020 to Q1 2024, compared to a national average of 11%. Prices increased by \$75,000, reaching \$375,000 in February 2023.

The rise especially impacts first-time homebuyers. A 3% down payment on a median-priced home in 2017 would result in a \$1,270 monthly mortgage. By 2023, this increased to \$2,325. A buyer who earns South Dakota's median income would spend about 43% of their pre-tax income on an average house after a 3% down payment.

On Wednesday, Fiala pointed to what he described as positive signs. He noted that South Dakota's

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median price per square foot of housing is \$215, which he said is 8% more affordable than the national average, and a slowdown in price increases for homes on the market.

"Additionally, our listing prices are very stable," he said. "With 77% of the listings showing no price change from the previous month."

Fiala also pointed the board to the Business Conditions Index for South Dakota, which factors in data like production, sales, logistics, inventories, and employment. In April, the index surged to its third consecutive high, reaching 61.4, surpassing March's 60.8. Any number above 50 implies economic expansion.

"Our state's index is highest in our region," Fiala said.

He said the state budget looks good too. With a month left in the fiscal year, he said, the state is seeing about \$120 million more in revenue than it had at this time last year.

"So, good news on that front," Fiala said.

The biggest budgetary boost came through an uptick in lost financial assets – usually held by banks – turned over to the state as unclaimed property.

Fiala said the state's unemployment rate remains "historically low" at 2%, and South Dakota has the nation's sixth-highest percentage of working-age people participating in the workforce.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

Industry, clean power groups breath a sigh of relief as Senate approves energy regulators

BY: ROBERT ZULLO - JUNE 14, 2024 4:39 PM

Three nominees by President Joe Biden to serve on the nation's top energy regulatory panel, which had risked losing a quorum, were approved this week by the U.S. Senate.

The vote to approve the new members — two Democrats and a Republican — for the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission was cheered by industry, renewable power and environmental groups alike, who said a full complement of commissioners is essential to the body meeting the challenges posed by an aging electric grid, a fast-shifting generation mix and debates over natural gas infrastructure, among other pressing energy issues.

"We are pleased to see FERC will be restored to a full roster, which will help provide regulatory certainty and the attention needed on key questions impacting our nation's energy systems," said Todd Snitchler, president and CEO of the Electric Power Supply Association, or EPSA, which represents companies that own power plants in competitive electricity markets.

"Having a full complement of five commissioners will allow FERC to keep advancing the vital work needed to deliver reliable, affordable and clean power to everyone around the country," said Ted Kelly, director of clean energy at the nonprofit Environmental Defense Fund.

FERC, which regulates interstate transmission and wholesale sales of electricity, as well as interstate transmission of natural gas and oil, among other responsibilities, "rarely shows up on people's radar screens," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. "But its mission is essential. Every time you turn on the light or touch the thermostat or see new power lines go up, the rules, regulations (and) policies of FERC are at work."

Leaving the seats vacant, Schumer said, "could create serious backlog and delay, potentially slowing down new projects that power people's homes and cities."

The new commissioners are: David Rosner, a Democrat and FERC energy industry analyst; West Virginia Solicitor General Lindsay See, a Republican who led the state's successful legal fight against the Environmental Protection Agency's carbon rules; and Judy Chang, a Democrat, energy economist and the former

undersecretary of energy and climate solutions for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. She is also an adjunct lecturer and senior fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School.

They join Chairman Willie Phillips, a Democrat, and Commissioner Mark Christie, a Republican. Commissioner Allison Clements, a Democrat, announced earlier this year she would not seek a second term. By law, FERC has five members, with no more than three from the same political party. They are appointed by the president with the "advice and consent of the Senate" and serve five-year staggered terms.

Though the commission will maintain a 3-2 Democratic majority, at least one environmental group has been critical of Rosner's selection.

Friends of the Earth called Rosner's fossil fuel ties "disqualifying" and blasted his work with the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, headed by the powerful and pro-coal Sen. Joe Manchin, of West Virginia who in May switched his registration from Democrat to independent. Manchin recommended Rosner, who was also previously a senior policy advisor at the U.S. Department of Energy and an associate director at the Bipartisan Policy Center's energy project, for the commission seat last year, Politico's E&E News reported. The Koch Industries-linked American Energy Alliance has also criticized Chang's past opposition to new natural gas pipelines. But for the Senate, at least, the relatively smooth confirmation process appeared to show that having a full complement of commissioners was preferable to picking fights over individual nominees.

"We all know that having a fully staffed FERC is going to make a lot of difference in what we do in this country," Manchin told his colleagues Tuesday, adding that each of the nominees had cleared his committee with "extremely strong" bipartisan support.

"Each of the nominees demonstrated deep experience on energy and legal matters, a commitment to follow the law and work within the authorities Congress has provided to FERC and a recognition that all of our nations' sources play an important role providing affordable, reliable energy to families and businesses across our country."

Sen. John Barrasso, a Republican from Wyoming and the ranking member on the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, noted that FERC went for seven months without a quorum during the Obama administration, putting many projects "that help keep the lights on, help heat our homes and aid our allies abroad" on hold.

"While I may not agree with each of the nominees on all the items all the time, all of them are well qualified," he said.

Robert Zullo is a national energy reporter based in southern Illinois focusing on renewable power and the electric grid. Robert joined States Newsroom in 2018 as the founding editor of the Virginia Mercury. Before that, he spent 13 years as a reporter and editor at newspapers in Virginia, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Louisiana. He has a bachelor's degree from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va. He grew up in Miami, Fla., and central New Jersey.

U.S. Supreme Court overturns ban on bump stocks used in Las Vegas mass shooting

Biden Administration calls reversal of Trump-era regulation a setback for gun safety

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - JUNE 14, 2024 1:45 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Supreme Court on Friday struck down a rule enacted following a 2017 mass shooting in Las Vegas that defined a semiautomatic rifle equipped with a bump stock attachment as a machine gun, which is generally prohibited under federal law.

The opinion, written by Justice Clarence Thomas, reduces the executive branch's already-limited ability to address gun violence. Thomas, a strong defender of Second Amendment gun rights, wrote that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives exceeded its statutory authority in prohibiting the

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sale and possession of bump stocks, which he said differed importantly from machine guns.

"Nothing changes when a semiautomatic rifle is equipped with a bump stock," Thomas wrote. "Between every shot, the shooter must release pressure from the trigger and allow it to reset before reengaging the trigger for another shot."

The case, *Garland v. Cargill*, was a 6-3 decision that broke along the court's established ideological lines. Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the senior member of the court's liberal wing, wrote the dissent, and argued that the decision puts "bump stocks back in civilian hands."

"When I see a bird that walks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, I call that bird a duck," she wrote. "A bump-stock-equipped semiautomatic rifle fires 'automatically more than one shot, without manual reloading, by a single function of the trigger.' Because I, like Congress, call that a machinegun, I respectfully dissent."

Gun safety setback

The White House slammed the decision.

"Today's decision strikes down an important gun safety regulation," President Joe Biden said in a statement. "Americans should not have to live in fear of this mass devastation."

Biden called on Congress to ban bump stocks and assault weapons, but any gun-related legislation is likely to be stalled with Republicans controlling the House and Democrats holding only a slim majority in the Senate.

"Bump stocks have played a devastating role in many of the horrific mass shootings in our country, but sadly it's no surprise to see the Supreme Court roll back this necessary public safety rule as they push their out of touch extreme agenda," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said in a statement.

Trump-era rule

This case stems from a regulation set during the Trump administration, following the mass shooting in Las Vegas. A gunman used rifles outfitted with bump stocks to fire into a crowd at a music festival, killing 58 people that night and two more who died of their injuries later, and injuring more than 500.

The next year, the ATF issued the rule that concluded bump stocks are illegal machine guns. Anyone who owned or possessed a bump stock was required to either destroy the material or turn it in to the agency to avoid criminal penalties.

Michael Cargill, a gun shop owner in Austin, Texas, surrendered two bump stocks to ATF and then challenged the rule in federal court.

A U.S. district court dismissed his case, but the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit agreed with Cargill that a 1986 law's definition of a machine gun does not apply to bump stocks because the rifles equipped with the attachments don't shoot multiple bullets "automatically," or "by a single function of the trigger."

That law defined a machine gun as "any weapon which shoots, is designed to shoot, or can be readily restored to shoot, automatically more than one shot, without manual reloading, by a single function of the trigger."

The Biden administration appealed the 5th Circuit's decision to the Supreme Court.

High court arguments

In oral arguments, the Biden administration defended the Trump-era rule and said that bump stocks allow semiautomatic rifles to fire automatically with a single pull of the trigger.

Attorneys for Cargill argued that bump stocks are used by repeatedly pulling the trigger, rather than firing automatically with a single pull.

In her dissent, Sotomayor said the decision will limit the federal government's "efforts to keep machine-guns from gunmen like the Las Vegas shooter."

Thomas also wrote a major gun decision in 2022 that invalidated a New York law against carrying a firearm in public without showing a special need for protection. The court decided the case on 14th Amendment

grounds, but it also expanded Second Amendment rights.

Because of that 2022 decision, another gun related case is before the court this session that tests a federal law that prevents the possession of firearms by a person who is subject to a domestic violence protective order. A decision is expected this month.

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

Biden Title IX regulation targeted by Republicans in Congress **SD's Rounds signs on to measure meant to revoke rule through congressional review**

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - JUNE 14, 2024 9:12 AM

WASHINGTON — Republicans in Congress got one step further in their efforts to reverse the Biden administration's final rule for Title IX after the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce approved a measure on Thursday that would overturn the updated regulations.

The U.S. Department of Education's final rule — which seeks to protect LGBTQ+ students from discrimination in schools and is set to take effect Aug. 1 — has been met with a wave of GOP backlash. But even if attempts to roll it back succeed in the House and Senate, President Joe Biden is likely to issue a veto.

Nearly 70 House GOP lawmakers are cosponsoring legislation that Rep. Mary Miller, an Illinois Republican and the committee's vice chair, introduced last week. The measure seeks to reverse the final rule through the Congressional Review Act — a procedural tool Congress can use to overturn certain actions from federal agencies.

The legislation is headed for a vote in the full House after the Republican-led committee approved the measure in a party-line vote, 24-16.

"Title IX has paved the way for our girls to access new opportunities in education, scholarships and athletics. Unfortunately, (President) Joe Biden is destroying all that progress," said Miller during Thursday's markup.

Supporters of Miller's legislation voiced their opposition to the new regulations during the markup, including committee Chairwoman Virginia Foxx, as well as Reps. Lisa McClain of Michigan, Bob Good of Virginia and Nathaniel Moran of Texas.

"To be clear, this rule is not about protecting LGBTQ students from sexual harassment. Title IX already does that. I'm gonna repeat that: Title IX already protects LGBTQ students," said Foxx, a North Carolina Republican.

Good said that "with the stroke of a pen, the Biden administration destroyed Title IX's promises of equal opportunity to women and eradicated sex-protected spaces like bathrooms, locker rooms and campus housing for students from kindergarten through grad school."

A slew of Republican attorneys general also quickly challenged the final rule that the federal agency released in April. It has racked up a number of legal challenges in various federal courts as GOP-led states attempt to block the rule from taking effect.

Democratic opposition

Meanwhile, Democratic members of the committee stood against the Republican-led measure.

Rep. Suzanne Bonamici, of Oregon, said "invoking the Congressional Review Act is not only unnecessary but deeply harmful."

Bonamici said the new Title IX rule "strengthens protections for vulnerable student populations, including the LGBTQ+ community, and for the first time, Title IX explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity."

Virginia's Rep. Bobby Scott, ranking member of the committee, said he found it baffling that the committee spent six months and more than five years "investigating the existence of hostile learning environ-

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ments in education settings and then decides to bring the CRA bill to the committee for reasons they have publicly stated.”

GOP efforts in the Senate

In the Senate, more than 30 Republicans, led by Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith of Mississippi, introduced legislation this week that also seeks to reverse the final rule by invoking the Congressional Review Act. Only a majority vote is required in the Senate.

South Dakota GOP Sen. Mike Rounds was among the lead co-sponsors of the Hyde-Smith effort.

At a Wednesday press conference announcing the legislation, Hyde-Smith called the rule “backward,” saying it “only hurts women and girls by stripping away opportunities and rights they have enjoyed for decades.” She added that the rule would have “dramatic implications beyond the classrooms.”

“Title IX has been about making sure women have a fair shake relative to men. The new Biden rule radically overhauls Title IX, injecting a progressive gender ideology that removes longstanding protections for women and girls,” Sen. Bill Cassidy, a Louisiana Republican and lead cosponsor of the legislation, said in a statement this week.

“This is the death of Title IX as we know it,” he added.

Education Department’s response

In response to these congressional efforts, a spokesperson for the Department of Education echoed an earlier statement, saying the department does not comment on pending litigation.

The spokesperson added that “as a condition of receiving federal funds, all federally funded schools are obligated to comply with these final regulations.”

The spokesperson also said the department looks forward to “working with school communities all across the country to ensure the Title IX guarantee of nondiscrimination in school is every student’s experience.”

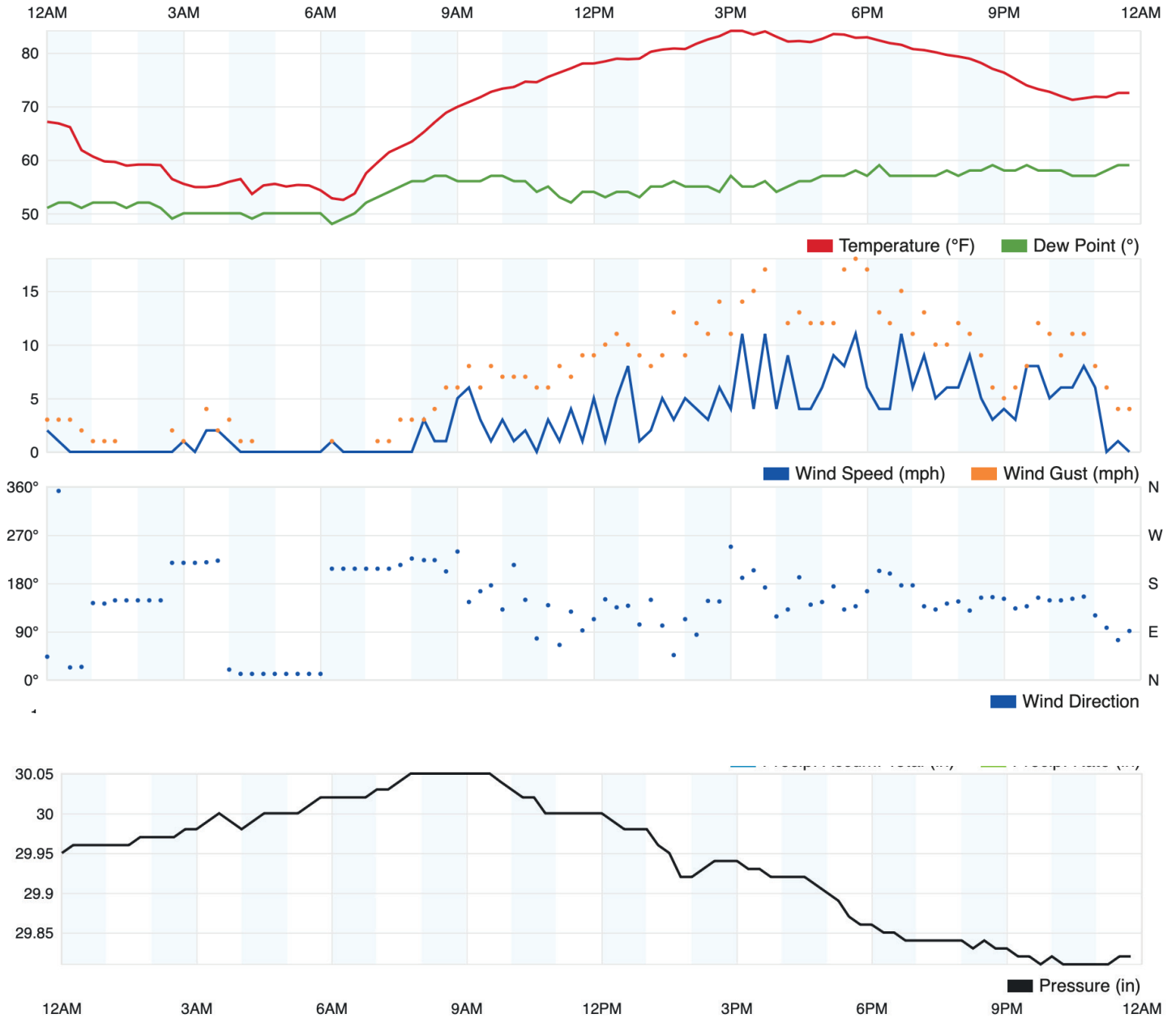
The department has not yet decided on a separate rule establishing new criteria regarding transgender athletes.

Shauneen Miranda is a reporter for States Newsroom’s Washington bureau. An alumna of the University of Maryland, she previously covered breaking news for Axios.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Saturday

Saturday Night

Sunday

Sunday Night

Monday



High: 79 °F

Breezy.
Slight Chance
T-storms then
Mostly Cloudy



Low: 63 °F

Partly Cloudy
then Slight
Chance
T-storms



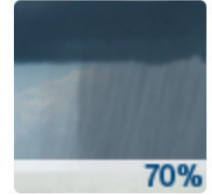
High: 83 °F

Mostly Sunny



Low: 53 °F

Slight Chance
Showers then
Showers
Likely



High: 67 °F

Showers
Likely

Severe Weather Threat Overview June 15, 2024 5:14 AM

This Evening

Timing/Location

- Severe storms possible from north central to south central SD this evening.
- The main threats for the area in **Yellow**

Tornado Potential

Very Low Low Medium High

Max Hail Size

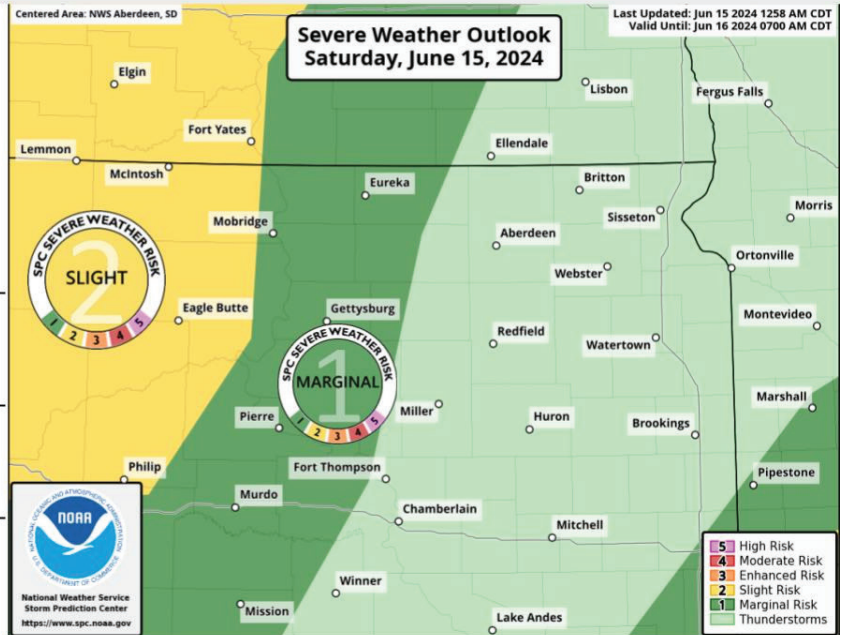
Dimes Quarters **Golfball** Baseball

Max Wind Speed

< 60 mph **60-70 mph** 70-80 mph > 80mph

Heavy Rain/Flooding Potential

Very Low Low Medium High



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Strong to severe storms are possible from north central to south central SD this evening with storms expected to weaken and dissipate east of the Missouri River tonight. The main threats for the areas in the Slight Risk (yellow) include large hail, ranging from a quarter (low end) up to golfball size (high end) along with 60-70 mph wind gusts. Areas in the Marginal Risk (dark green) threats include hail, up to the size of quarters, and 60 mph wind gusts.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 85 °F at 3:08 PM

Low Temp: 52 °F at 6:22 AM

Wind: 19 mph at 5:51 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 15 hours, 43 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 105 in 1933

Record Low: 36 in 1968

Average High: 80

Average Low: 55

Average Precip in June.: 1.77

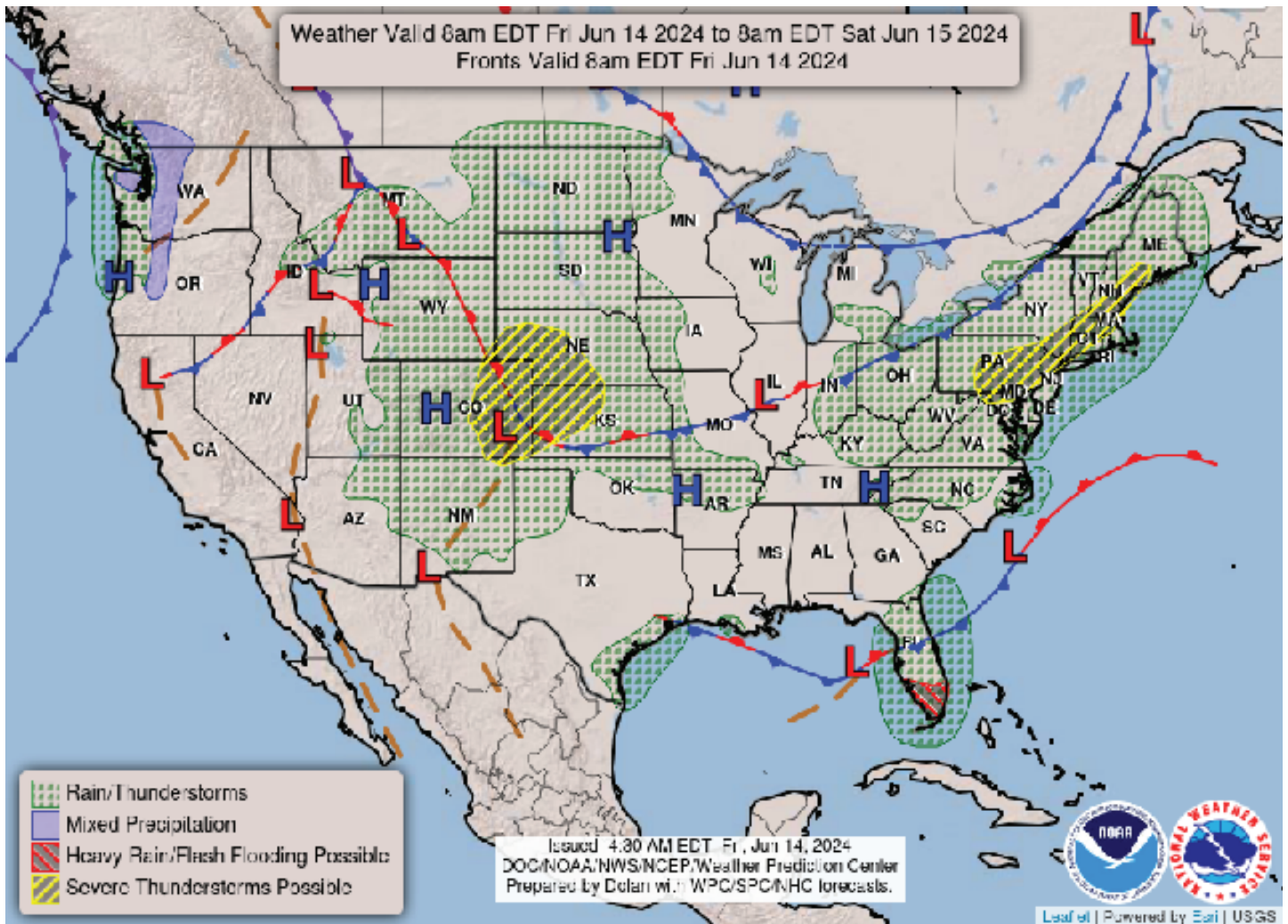
Precip to date in June: 0.50

Average Precip to date: 9.02

Precip Year to Date: 7.57

Sunset Tonight: 9:24:43 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:41:28 am



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Today in Weather History

June 15, 1935: This estimated F3 tornado moved east from 17 miles southwest of Onida. There was near F4 damage to one farm about 9 miles SSW of Onida. The house was destroyed, 60 cattle were killed, and five people were injured. At another farm, the home shifted over the storm cellar, trapping a family.

June 15, 1977: There were thunderstorms with heavy rain and some hail which began on the 15th and continued into the 16th. At Watertown, almost 6.9 inches of rain fell during this two day period. In Deuel County, Gary received 6 inches, Altamont 5.5 and Brandt, 4.5 inches in Goodwin, and 3.70 inches in Clear Lake. Other amounts include; 4.85 inches at 3NE of Raymond; 4.57 inches in Clark; 4.21 at 1NE of Bryant; and 3.97 inches in Castlewood.

June 15, 1978: Numerous severe thunderstorms developed over all of central South Dakota. Tornadoes, funnel clouds, hail up to baseball size, and wind gusts to near 80 mph caused widespread destruction. Estimated loss was between 20-25 million dollars. The Governor declared some counties disaster areas. Six trailers were destroyed, and a home was unroofed northwest of Aberdeen. Fifteen people were injured from these storms.

June 15, 1978: Torrential rains began during the evening hours and continued into the morning hours on the 16th. Heavy rains were estimated between 5 to 6 inches, causing flash flooding south of Watertown. Some rainfall amounts include; 2.43 inches in Watertown; 2.07 in Castlewood; and 2.05 inches in Clear Lake. Hail caused severe crop damage in Hughes County.

1662 - A fast was held at Salem MA with prayers for rain, and the Lord gave a speedy answer. (David Ludlum)

1879 - McKinney ND received 7.7 inches of rain in 24 hours, a state record. (The Weather Channel)

1896 - The temperature at Fort Mojave, CA, soared to 127 degrees, the hottest reading of record for June for the U.S. The low that day was 97 degrees. Morning lows of 100 degrees were reported on the 12th, 14th and 16th of the month. (The Weather Channel)

1953 - Dust devils are usually rather benign weather phenomena, however, two boys were injured by one near Prescott AZ. One of the boys suffered a black eye, and the other boy had two vertebrae fractured by wind-blown debris. (The Weather Channel)

1957 - East Saint Louis was deluged with 16.54 inches of rain in 24 hours, a record for the state of Illinois. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Thunderstorms developing along a cold front produced severe weather in the northwestern U.S. A tornado damaged five homes and destroyed a barn near Salmon ID. It lifted a metal shed 100 feet into the air, and deposited it 100 yards away. Hail an inch and a half in diameter caused ten million dollars damage to automobiles at Nampa ID. (The National Weather Channel) (Storm Data)

1988 - Severe thunderstorms in the Central High Plains Region spawned five tornadoes around Denver, CO, in just one hour. A strong (F-3) tornado in southern Denver injured seven persons and caused ten million dollars damage. Twenty-six cities in the eastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. The high of 97 degrees at Portland ME was a record for June. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms produced severe weather over the Southern and Middle Atlantic Coast States. The thunderstorms spawned eight tornadoes, including strong (F-3) tornadoes which injured three persons at Mountville PA and four persons at Columbia, PA. There were 111 reports of large hail and damaging winds, including wind gusts to 80 mph at Norfolk, VA, and Hogback Mountain, SC. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1991: The second largest volcanic eruption of the 20th Century began as Mt. Pinatubo injected 15 to 30 million tons of sulfur dioxide 100,000 feet into the atmosphere. 343 people were killed in the Philippines as a result of the eruptions, and 200,000 were left homeless. Material from the explosion would spread around the globe, leading to climate changes worldwide as the sun's energy was blocked out and global temperatures cooled by as much as one degree Fahrenheit. 1992 was globally one of the coldest since the 1970s.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

LIVING FOR OTHERS

William Booth, the Founder of the Salvation Army, had a deep love for the Lord and the poor of London. In fact, the Army was founded in the slums of London in a nation that was not very kind to the poor. In fact, Booth was actually arrested for practicing charity among the poor.

During that era the needs of the poor were great, and times were difficult for all. As a result, his work grew rapidly. He was told that there was a similar need in America and decided to send some "volunteers" from his Army to America to begin their work here.

On one occasion the American Salvation Army was having a convention. Although he could not attend he was asked to send a message to the ones in attendance. He cabled one word only: "Others!"

There is a great danger when we do not think of "Others!" Paul warned about it when he wrote, "Don't be selfish: don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself."

It is almost impossible to imagine the impact that we Christians could have on the world if we took Paul's words to heart. Imagine with me, if you can, how different the world would be if we accepted the problems of others as though they were ours.

Prayer: Help me, Father, to accept my responsibility to be moved with compassion and act with charity to meet the needs of others who need hope and help. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Don't be selfish: don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Philippians 2:3



We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 06.14.24

1 25 26 31 65 2

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$61,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 06.12.24

3 11 16 30 44 8

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$3,140,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 40 Mins 53 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 06.14.24

6 21 25 33 45 6

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 55 Mins 52 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 06.12.24

5 6 10 17 21

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 55 Mins 52 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 06.12.24

12 13 59 68 69 13

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 24 Mins 53 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 06.12.24

19 30 31 61 62 21

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$34,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 24 Mins 53 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Move over grizzlies and wolves: Yellowstone visitors hope to catch a glimpse of rare white buffalo

By MATTHEW BROWN, MEAD GRUVER and AMY BETH HANSON Associated Press

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK, Wyo. (AP) — Standing at the edge of a bluff overlooking the Lamar River in Yellowstone National Park, TJ Ammond stared through binoculars at hundreds of buffalo dotting the verdant valley below.

Tan-colored calves frolicked near their mothers while hulking bulls wallowed in mud.

As his wife and young children clustered behind him, Ammond panned the vast herd and cried out: "I see a white one!"

"Or no — that's a pronghorn," he soon corrected. "It's white and it's small."

Grizzly bears and wolves are usually the star attractions for wildlife watchers in Yellowstone but this spring, a tiny and exceedingly rare white buffalo calf has stolen the show.

White buffalo — also known as bison — are held sacred by many Native Americans who greeted news of the birth of one in Yellowstone as an auspicious sign.

It all began when Kalispell, Montana, photographer Erin Braaten snapped several images of the tiny, un-gainly creature nuzzling with its mother on June 4, soon after its birth near the banks of the Lamar River. Braaten and her family had been driving through the park when she spotted "something really white" and got a closer look through her telephoto lens.

They turned around and pulled over to watch and shoot photos of the calf with its mother for over half an hour.

Despite throngs of visitors with scopes and photographers with telephoto lenses in the Lamar Valley, a prime spot for wildlife viewing in Yellowstone, few others saw the calf and no sightings have been reported since. Even Braaten and her family did not see the calf again despite going back to look over the next two days, she said.

As in legend, the calf remains mysterious in life.

Some speculate it was a short one. Bison calves often don't survive when their herds decide to plunge across waters like the Lamar, which has been flowing high and muddy with mountain snowmelt.

Yet even if it has died, the event is no less significant to Native Americans, said Chief Arvol Looking Horse, spiritual leader of the Lakota, Dakota and the Nakota Oyate in South Dakota, and the 19th keeper of the sacred White Buffalo Calf Woman Pipe and Bundle.

"The thing is, we all know that it was born and it's like a miracle to us," Looking Horse said.

The creature's birth fulfills a Lakota prophecy that portends better times, according to members of the American Indian tribe who caution that it's also a signal that more must be done to protect the earth and its animals. They plan a ceremony in the coming weeks to commemorate the event.

Word of the white buffalo has meanwhile spread far and wide. Ammond had heard about the white calf on The Weather Channel and was keen to see it on his family's trip to Yellowstone from Ohio.

Usually, white bison are born in ranch herds due to interbreeding with cattle. They are rare but not unheard of, with births making local headlines every so often.

Two genetic variations, leucism and albinism, account for an unusually light-colored animal. Experts doubt the Yellowstone calf is an albino.

In any event, a wild white buffalo is exquisitely rare — maybe even unheard of in Yellowstone, one of the last sanctuaries for free-roaming American bison. The animals once numbered in the tens of millions before commercial hunting drove them to near extinction. Yellowstone's herd numbers about 5,000.

For Yellowstone's dedicated wildlife watchers, a good look or photo of a wolf, grizzly — or especially an elusive wolverine or lynx — makes for a good day in the field. A glimpse of the white bison calf would be the privilege of a lifetime.

Employees at several of the businesses that offer guided tours, hikes and horseback rides in Yellowstone said they had not seen the white bison calf. At least one was skeptical the sighting was authentic but a cellphone video provided by Braaten's son, Zayne Braaten, showing the calf in a wide scene looking very much like the Lamar Valley left little room for doubt the calf is — or was — the real deal.

Amateur photographer Sabrina Midkiff, from Houston, said getting pictures of buffalo calves was the main purpose of her trip to the park this summer. She'd taken thousands of photos so far and wondered if the white calf was hidden somewhere in the crowd in one of her images.

Seeing it would be thrilling, Midkiff said, but she'd heard talk that it may have died — by drowning, getting eaten by wolves or coyotes, or simply being too weak to survive.

"There are a lot of things that could happen out here in the wild," she said.

Near the site where Braaten said she took her photos, New Mexico native Bob Worthington stood outside his truck Thursday and scoped a distant hillside. He said he'd been visiting Yellowstone for 26 years with a singular focus: Seeing grizzly bears.

Worthington gruffly dismissed a query about the valley's bison herds. But when the white calf was mentioned, he lit up with a grin.

"I'd love to get to see the little rascal," he said.

Report finds Colorado was built on \$1.7 trillion of land expropriated from tribal nations

By GRAHAM LEE BREWER Associated Press

A report published this week by a Native American-led nonprofit examines in detail the dispossession of \$1.7 trillion worth of Indigenous homelands in Colorado by the state and the U.S. and the more than \$546 million the state has reaped in mineral extraction from them.

The report, shared first with The Associated Press, identifies 10 tribal nations that have "aboriginal title, congressional title, and treaty title to lands within Colorado" and details the ways the land was legally and illegally taken. It determined that many of the transactions were in direct violation of treaty rights or in some cases lacked title for a legal transfer.

"Once we were removed, they just simply started divvying up the land, creating parcels and selling it to non-Natives and other interests and businesses," said Dallin Maybee, an artist, legal scholar and enrolled member of the Northern Arapaho Tribe who took part in the Truth, Restoration, and Education Commission, which compiled the report.

"When you think about examples of land theft," Maybee continued, "that is one of the most blatant instances that we could see."

The commission was convened by People of the Sacred Land, a Colorado-based nonprofit that works to document the history of Indigenous displacement in the state. The commission and its report are modeled after similar truth and reconciliation commissions that sought to comprehensively account for genocide and the people still affected by those acts and governmental policies.

The report also recommends actions that can be taken by the state, the federal government and Congress, including honoring treaty rights by resolving illegal land transfers; compensating the tribal nations affected; restoring hunting and fishing rights; and levying a 0.1% fee on real estate deals in Colorado to "mitigate the lasting effects of forced displacement, genocide, and other historical injustices"

"If acknowledgment is the first step, then what is the second step?" Maybee said. "That's where some of the treaties come in. They guaranteed us health and welfare and education, and we just simply want them to live up to those promises."

That could look something like what happened not long ago in Canada, where, following the conclusion of a truth and reconciliation commission in 2015, the government set aside \$4.7 billion to support Indigenous communities affected by its Indian residential schools.

The U.S. currently has no similar commission, but a bill co-sponsored by Rep. Tom Cole (R-Okla.), a Chickasaw Nation citizen, and Rep. Sharice Davids (D-Kan.), a citizen of the Ho-Chunk Nation, would

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establish a commission to research and document the long-term effects of the Indian boarding school system in the U.S. That measure passed the House Education and Workforce Committee on Thursday with bipartisan support.

"The United States carried out a federal policy of genocide and extermination against Native peoples, and their weapon against our youngest and most vulnerable was the policy of Indian Boarding Schools," said Ben Barnes, chief of the Shawnee Tribe, who testified before Congress in support of a commission to investigate the ongoing effects of the boarding schools.

"The next step is reconciliation and healing for the generations who've dealt with the trauma that followed, which begins with establishing the Truth and Healing Commission to investigate further," Barnes said.

The 771-page report also calls on Colorado State University to return 19,000 acres of land that was taken from several tribal nations through the Morrill Act, signed by Abraham Lincoln in 1862, which used expropriated land to create land grant universities across the country.

In 2023 the university pledged to commit \$500,000 of the earnings from its land grant holdings. But while the commission commended that decision, it said "there are questions about its adequacy, given the resources that have been generated by the endowment created by selling and/or leasing stolen land."

A university spokesperson told AP that the school has not had a chance to review the report but noted that "that revenue from the endowment land income fund is used for the benefit of Native American faculty, staff and students."

The commission also found that Native American students in Colorado have lower high school graduation rates and higher dropout rates than any other racial demographic. It determined that state schools teach about Native American issues only once in elementary school and then again in high school U.S. history classes, and it called on the Colorado Department of Education to increase the amount of its curriculum that focuses on the histories, languages and modern cultures of tribal nations that are indigenous to the state.

The education department said in a statement that it is "committed to elevating and honoring our Indigenous communities.

"We have worked alongside tribal representatives to create a culturally affirming fourth-grade curriculum focused on Ute history fourth-grade curriculum and have made this available to our school districts and educators," the statement added.

However that educational program is not mandatory across Colorado, where curriculum decisions are made at the local level.

A 2019 study found that 87% of public schools in the U.S. fail to teach about Indigenous peoples in a post-1900 context and that most states make no mention of them in their K-12 curriculum.

"They should be an integral part of the curriculum, especially in areas where there's a high percentage of Native Americans," said Richard Little Bear, former president of Chief Dull Knife College in Montana and a member of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe. "There's gotta be a full scale effort."

World leaders to meet at Swiss resort on possible Ukraine peace roadmap. Russia is notably absent

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

OBBÜRGEN, Switzerland (AP) — The presidents of Ecuador, Ivory Coast, Kenya and Somalia will join many Western heads of state and government and other leaders at a conference this weekend aimed to plot out first steps toward peace in Ukraine – with Russia notably absent.

Swiss officials hosting the conference say more than 50 heads of state and government, including Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, will join the gathering at the Bürgenstock resort overlooking Lake Lucerne. Some 100 delegations including European bodies and the United Nations will be on hand.

Who will show up – and who will not – has become one of the key stakes of a meeting that critics say will be useless without the presence of Russian President Vladimir Putin's government, which invaded Ukraine in February 2022 and is pushing ahead with the war.

As U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris arrived at the venue, shuttle buses rumbled up a mountain road

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that snaked up to the site — at times with traffic jams — with police along the route checking journalists' IDs and helicopters ferrying in VIPs buzzed overhead.

Meanwhile, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have dispatched their foreign ministers while key developing countries like Brazil, an observer at the event, India and South Africa will be represented at lower levels.

China, which backs Russia, is joining scores of countries that are sitting out the conference, many of whom have more pressing issues than the bloodiest conflict in far-away Europe since World War II. Beijing says any peace process needs to have the participation of both Russia and Ukraine, and has floated its own ideas for peace.

Last month, China and Brazil agreed to six "common understandings" on a political settlement of the Ukraine crisis, asking other countries to endorse them and play a role in promoting peace talks.

The six points include an agreement to "support an international peace conference held at a proper time that is recognized by both Russia and Ukraine, with equal participation of all parties as well as fair discussion of all peace plans."

Zelenskyy has recently led a diplomatic push to draw in participants to the Swiss summit.

Russian troops who now control nearly a quarter of Ukrainian land in the east and south have made some territorial gains in recent months. When talk of a Swiss-hosted peace initiative began last summer, Ukrainian forces had recently regained large swaths of territory, notably near the cities of southern Kherson and northern Kharkiv.

Against the battlefield backdrop and diplomatic strategizing, summit organizers have presented three agenda items: nuclear safety, such as at the Russia-controlled Zaporizhzhia power plant; humanitarian assistance and exchange of prisoners of war; and global food security — which has been disrupted at times due to impeded shipments through the Black Sea.

That to-do list, encapsulating some of the least controversial issues, is well short of proposals and hopes laid out by Zelenskyy in a 10-point peace formula in late 2022.

The plan includes ambitious calls, including the withdrawal of Russian troops from occupied Ukrainian territory, the cessation of hostilities and restoring Ukraine's state borders with Russia, including Crimea.

Putin's government, meanwhile, wants any peace deal to be built around a draft agreement negotiated in the early phases of the war that included provisions for Ukraine's neutral status and limits on its armed forces, while delaying talks about Russia-occupied areas. Ukraine's push over the years to join the NATO military alliance has rankled Moscow.

Ukraine is unable to negotiate from a position of strength, analysts say.

"The situation on the battlefield has changed dramatically," said Alexander Gabuev, director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, saying that although Russia "can't achieve its maximalist objectives quickly through military means, but it's gaining momentum and pushing Ukraine really hard."

"So a lot of countries that are coming to the summit would question whether the Zelenskyy peace formula still has legs," he told reporters in a call Wednesday.

With much of the world's focus recently on the war in Gaza and national elections in 2024, Ukraine's backers want to return focus to Russia's breach of international law and a restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity.

On Friday, Putin called the conference "just another ploy to divert everyone's attention."

The International Crisis Group, an advisory firm that works to end conflict, wrote this week that "absent a major surprise on the Bürgenstock," the event is "unlikely to deliver much of consequence."

"Nonetheless, the Swiss summit is a chance for Ukraine and its allies to underline what the U.N. General Assembly recognized in 2022 and repeated in its February 2023 resolution on a just peace in Ukraine: Russia's all-out aggression is a blatant violation of international law," it said.

Experts say they'll be looking at the wording of any outcome document, and plans for the way forward. Swiss officials, aware of Russia's reticence about the conference, have repeatedly said they hope Russia can join the process one day, as do Ukrainian officials.

"Most likely, the three items under review will be endorsed by the participants. But then the big question is

'OK, what comes next?'" Gabuev said. "And I don't think we have a very clear answer to that question yet."

As leaders headed to the conference venue, the war raged on.

Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov of Russia's southern Belgorod region, writing on social media, blamed Ukraine for shelling Friday that struck a five-story apartment building in the town of Shebekino, killing five people. There was no immediate comment from Kyiv.

In Ukraine, shelling killed at least two civilians and wounded eight others on Friday and overnight, regional officials said. Gov. Oleh Syniehubov of the Kharkiv region, which has been the focus of a recent Russian offensive, said one shell fell near a kindergarten while others struck homes.

US military targets Houthi radar sites in Yemen after a merchant sailor goes missing

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The United States military unleashed a wave of attacks targeting radar sites operated by Yemen's Houthi rebels over their assaults on shipping in the crucial Red Sea corridor, authorities said Saturday, after one merchant sailor went missing following an earlier Houthi strike on a ship.

The attacks come as the U.S. Navy faces the most intense combat it has seen since World War II in trying to counter the Houthi campaign — attacks the rebels say are meant to halt the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip. However, the Iranian-backed rebel assaults often see the Houthis target ships and sailors who have nothing to do with the war while traffic remains halved through a corridor vital for cargo and energy shipments between Asia, Europe and the Mideast.

U.S. strikes destroyed seven radars within Houthi-controlled territory, the military's Central Command said. It did not elaborate on how the sites were destroyed and did not immediately respond to questions from The Associated Press.

"These radars allow the Houthis to target maritime vessels and endanger commercial shipping," Central Command said in a statement.

The U.S. separately destroyed two bomb-laden drone boats in the Red Sea, as well as a drone launched by the Houthis over the waterway, it said.

The Houthis, who have held Yemen's capital, Sanaa, since 2014, did not acknowledge the strikes, nor any military losses. That's been typical since the U.S. began launching airstrikes targeting the rebels.

Meanwhile, Central Command said one commercial sailor from the Liberian-flagged, Greek-owned bulk cargo carrier Tutor remained missing after an attack Wednesday by the Houthis that used a bomb-carrying drone boat to strike the vessel.

"The crew abandoned ship and were rescued by USS Philippine Sea and partner forces," Central Command said. The "Tutor remains in the Red Sea and is slowly taking on water."

The missing sailor is Filipino, according to the state-run Philippine News Agency, which cited Migrant Workers Secretary Hans Leo Cacdac. He said most of the Tutor's 22 mariners were from the Philippines.

"We're trying to account for the particular seafarer in the ship and are praying that we could find him," he reportedly said Friday night.

The Houthis have launched more than 50 attacks on shipping, killed three sailors, seized one vessel and sunk another since November, according to the U.S. Maritime Administration. A U.S.-led airstrike campaign has targeted the Houthis since January, with a series of strikes May 30 killing at least 16 people and wounding 42 others, the rebels say.

The war in the Gaza Strip has killed more than 37,000 Palestinians there, according to Gaza health officials, while hundreds of others have been killed in Israeli operations in the West Bank. It began after Hamas-led militants attacked Israel on Oct. 7, killing about 1,200 people and taking around 250 hostage.

"The Houthis claim to be acting on behalf of Palestinians in Gaza and yet they are targeting and threatening the lives of third-country nationals who have nothing to do with the conflict in Gaza," Central Com-

mand said. "The ongoing threat to international commerce caused by the Houthis in fact makes it harder to deliver badly needed assistance to the people of Yemen as well as Gaza."

Muslim pilgrims converge at Mount Arafat for daylong worship as Hajj reaches its peak

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

MOUNT ARAFAT, Saudi Arabia (AP) — Following the footsteps of prophets beneath a burning sun, Muslims from around the world congregated Saturday at a sacred hill in Saudi Arabia for intense, daylong worship and reflection.

The ritual at Mount Arafat, known as the hill of mercy, is considered the peak of the Hajj pilgrimage. It is often the most memorable for pilgrims, who stand shoulder to shoulder, feet to feet, asking God for mercy, blessings, prosperity and good health. The mount is about 20 kilometers (12 miles) southeast of Mecca.

Thousands of pilgrims walked to the mount through the predawn darkness. On the slopes of the rocky hill and the surrounding area, many raised their hands in worship with tears streaming down their faces.

"For sure it is something great. It is the best day for Muslims during the year, and the best feeling that anyone can experience," Hussein Mohammed, an Egyptian pilgrim, said as he stood on the rocky slopes at dawn. "It is the best place for anyone hoping to be (here) on this day and at this moment."

It's believed that Prophet Muhammad delivered his final speech, known as the Farewell Sermon, at the sacred mount 1,435 years ago. In the sermon, the prophet called for equality and unity among Muslims.

Ali Osman, a Spaniard pilgrim, was overwhelmed, as he stepped down the hill of mercy. He said he felt that he gained spiritual and physical strength at the sacred site.

"The place, thank God, (gives) very good energy," he said. "I came here, thank God. It is my first time. I hope to come again in the future."

Hajj is one of the largest religious gatherings on earth. The rituals officially started Friday when pilgrims moved from Mecca's Grand Mosque to Mina, a desert plain just outside the city.

Saudi authorities expect the number of pilgrims this year to exceed 2 million, approaching pre-coronavirus pandemic levels.

The pilgrimage is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. All Muslims are required to make the five-day Hajj at least once in their lives if they are physically and financially able to make the demanding pilgrimage.

The rituals largely commemorate the Quran's accounts of Prophet Ibrahim, his son Prophet Ismail and Ismail's mother Hajar — or Abraham and Ismael as they are named in the Bible.

This year's Hajj came against the backdrop of the raging war in the Gaza Strip between Israel and Hamas, which pushed the Middle East to the brink of a regional war between Israel and its allies on one side and Iran-backed militant groups on the other.

Palestinians in the coastal enclave of Gaza were not able to travel to Mecca for Hajj this year because of the closure of the Rafah crossing in May, when Israel extended its ground offensive to the strip's southern city of Rafah on the border with Egypt.

Staving off potential protests or chants about the war during the Hajj, Saudi authorities said they won't tolerate politicizing the pilgrimage. Col. Talal Al-Shalhoub, a spokesperson for the Interior Ministry, told reporters Friday evening that the Saudi government "will not allow any attempt to turn the sacred sites (in Mecca) into an arena for mob chanting."

The time of year when the Hajj takes place varies, given that it is set for five days in the second week of Dhu al-Hijjah, the last month in the Islamic lunar calendar.

Most of the Hajj rituals are held outdoors with little if any shade. When it falls in the summer months, temperatures can soar to over 40 Celsius (104 Fahrenheit). The Health Ministry has cautioned that temperatures at the holy sites could reach 48 C (118 F) and urged pilgrims to use umbrellas and drink more water to stay hydrated.

Most of the pilgrims at Mount Arafat carried umbrellas, while others sat in the shadow of a few trees and buildings around the hill of mercy. And, as at Mina and the Grand Mosque, cooling stations on the

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roads leading to the mount and in its surrounding areas sprayed pilgrims with water to help fight the heat, which had already climbed to 47 C (116.6 F) at Mount Arafat, according to Saudi Arabia's National Center for Meteorology.

After Saturday's worship in Mount Arafat, pilgrims will travel a few kilometers (miles) to a site known as Muzdalifa to collect pebbles that they will use in the symbolic stoning of pillars representing the devil back in Mina. Many walk, while others use buses.

Pilgrims then return to Mina for three days, coinciding with the festive Eid al-Adha holiday, when financially able Muslims around the world slaughter livestock and distribute the meat to poor people. Afterward, they return to Mecca for a final circumambulation, known as Farewell Tawaf.

Once the Hajj is over, men are expected to shave their heads, and women to snip a lock of hair in a sign of renewal. Most of the pilgrims then leave Mecca for the city of Medina, some 340 kilometers (210 miles) away, to pray in Prophet Muhammad's tomb, the Sacred Chamber. The tomb is part of the prophet's mosque, which is one of the three holiest sites in Islam, along with the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

Hajj is a notorious choke-point for crowds. In 2015, several thousands of pilgrims were crushed to death in a crowd surge. Saudi authorities never offered a final death toll.

In recent years, Saudi authorities have made significant efforts to improve access and avoid deadly accidents. Tens of thousands of security personnel were deployed across the city, especially around the holy sites, to control the crowds, and the government built a high-speed rail link to ferry people between holy sites in the city, which has been jammed with traffic during the Hajj season. Pilgrims enter through special electronic gates.

Saudi authorities have also expanded and renovated the Grand Mosque where cranes are seen around some of its seven minarets as construction was underway in the holy site.

Host Germany gives Euro 2024 liftoff by outclassing 10-man Scotland 5-1

By DANIELLA MATAR AP Sports Writer

MUNICH (AP) — Host Germany could hardly have wished for a better start to the European Championship.

Goals from Florian Wirtz and Jamal Musiala in an imperious first half set Germany on the way to a confidence-boosting 5-1 win over 10-man Scotland in the Euro 2024 curtainraiser on Friday.

While Germany didn't really have to break sweat against a sub-par Scotland at Allianz Arena, it was the ideal result to launch its tournament and ramp up excitement in the country.

"Yes, that's exactly the way we wanted to start and, to be honest, we needed a start just like that," Germany captain İlkay Gündoğan told German broadcaster ZDF. "I had a good feeling before the game already, to be honest, and it came true, thank God.

"But exactly this atmosphere, the euphoria in the stadium now with our own fans, that's exactly what we need in order to go far."

Pre-tournament title expectations of the Germans were underwhelming after they crashed out of their last three major tournaments. But they've opened with their biggest victory in Euros history.

They dominated the first half, which ended in the worst possible way for Scotland when defender Ryan Porteous was sent off and Kai Havertz converted the resulting penalty kick. Substitutes Niclas Füllkrug and Emre Can piled on to Scotland's misery after the break.

"The first 20 minutes were very impressive. The first goals were very good," Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann said. "It's very valuable that many players performed well early on.

"It was only the first step but a very good one and we can build on this one. We're very happy."

Scotland, which hadn't had a shot on goal all match, managed to give its raucous fans something to celebrate late on when the ball was bundled into the back of the net off Germany defender Antonio Rüdiger for an own goal.

Steve Clarke's side will have to do better against Hungary and Switzerland if it is to get out of Group A

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and reach the knockout stage for the first time.

"Difficult night. We didn't play to our standard. The German team were excellent," Clarke said.

"We feel as though we've let ourselves down. We're better than that. Hopefully we can show that the next two games."

Scotland's Tartan Army of supporters started the match in fine voice but they were swiftly quietened when Wirtz scored in the 10th.

Toni Kroos picked out Joshua Kimmich with a brilliant crossfield lob and he rolled it across for Wirtz to fire in.

Wirtz became Germany's youngest Euros goal-scorer at 21. Musiala, 67 days older than Wirtz, doubled Germany's tally nine minutes later after combining well with Havertz.

Right on halftime, Scotland goalkeeper Angus Gunn only parried a header from Gündoğan, but just when the captain appeared set to tuck home the rebound he was upended by a thunderous challenge from Porteous.

Referee Clément Turpin showed Porteous a straight red card and awarded Germany a penalty, which Havertz converted.

Scotland managed to hold out in the second half until an attempted exchange between Musiala and Gündoğan fell kindly for Füllkrug. The substitute, who came on only five minutes earlier, unleashed a thunderbolt into the top right corner.

Scotland's late consolation came when Kieran McKenna's header from a free kick went in off Rüdiger.

Still, Scotland conceded five goals for the first time in 12 years when Can, who was brought into the squad only two days ago as a late replacement for the ill Aleksandar Pavlovic, curled in in stoppage time.

"A great feeling and a crazy story ... I was on vacation two days ago" Can told ZDF. "Then the call came on Wednesday, and on Wednesday evening I met up with the team, trained once yesterday, came in today (off the bench), scored a goal. I'm thankful to Julian (Nagelsmann) and the whole coaching staff that they put their trust in me."

Late German soccer great Franz Beckenbauer was honored before the match, and the capacity crowd included German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Scotland First Minister John Swinney, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

Hungary is next in Germany's sights on Wednesday, when Scotland plays Switzerland.

Charles Barkley says next season will be his last on TV, no matter what happens with NBA media deals

By The Associated Press undefined

Charles Barkley said Friday that next season will be his last on TV, no matter what happens with the NBA's media deals.

The Hall of Fame player has spent the last 24 years working as a studio analyst for TNT, which could lose the rights to broadcast NBA after next season.

But no matter where the games end up, Barkley won't be following.

"There's been a lot of noise around our network the last few months and I just want to say I've talked to all the other networks, but I ain't going nowhere other than TNT," Barkley said while working on NBA TV's NBA Finals postgame show.

The NBA's current deals with ABC-ESPN and Turner Sports expire after next season and the league has been talking with NBC, ESPN and Amazon, among other networks and platforms, about what comes next. Commissioner Adam Silver said last week he hopes new long-term deals will be completed shortly.

Barkley and broadcast teammates Ernie Johnson, Shaquille O'Neal and Kenny Smith have discussed their uncertain future on their popular "Inside the NBA" studio show. Barkley would seemingly draw interest from any network televising NBA, but the 61-year-old has decided that 25 years will be enough and he will "pass the baton," hopefully, to a TNT teammate such as Vince Carter or Jamal Crawford.

"But I have made the decision myself no matter what happens, next year is going to be my last year on television," he said.

A usually joyous Muslim holiday reminds families in Gaza of war's punishing toll

By FATMA KHALED and WAFAA SHURAFI Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Last summer, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip celebrated the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha the way it's supposed to be: with large family feasts, meat shared with those less fortunate, and new clothes and gifts for children.

But this year, after eight months of devastating war between Israel and Hamas, many families will eat canned food in stifling tents. There's hardly any meat or livestock at local markets, and no money for holiday treats or presents — only war, hunger and misery, with no end in sight.

"There is no Eid this year," said Nadia Hamouda, whose daughter was killed in the war and who fled from her home in northern Gaza months ago and is staying in a tent in the central town of Deir al-Balah. "When we hear the call to prayer, we cry over those we lost and the things we lost, and what has happened to us, and how we used to live before."

Muslims around the world will celebrate the four-day Eid al-Adha, the Feast of the Sacrifice, early in the week. It commemorates the Prophet Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son, Ismail, as recounted in the Quran. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, Abraham is called to sacrifice his other son, Isaac.

Gaza was impoverished and isolated even before the war, but people still managed to celebrate by hanging up colorful decorations, surprising children with treats and gifts, and purchasing meat or slaughtering livestock to share with those less fortunate.

"It was a real Eid," Hamouda said. "Everyone was happy, including the children."

Now much of Gaza is in ruins and most of the population of 2.3 million Palestinians have fled their homes. After Hamas' surprise attack into Israel on Oct. 7, in which Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people and took another 250 hostage, Israel launched a massive air and ground assault.

The war has killed over 37,000 Palestinians, according to the Hamas-run Health Ministry. It has destroyed most of Gaza's agriculture and food production, leaving people reliant on humanitarian aid that has been held up by Israeli restrictions and the ongoing fighting.

United Nations agencies have warned that over a million people — nearly half the population — could experience the highest level of starvation in the coming weeks.

In early May, Egypt shut down its crossing into the southern Gazan city of Rafah after Israel captured the Palestinian side of it, sealing the only route for people to enter or leave the territory. That means virtually no Palestinians from Gaza will be able to make the annual Hajj pilgrimage that precedes the Eid.

Ashraf Sahwi, who was among hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who fled from Gaza City earlier in the war and is also living in a tent, has no idea when or if he'll be able to return.

"We don't even know what happened to our houses or whether we'll be able to live in them again, or if it's even possible to rebuild," he said.

Abdelsattar al-Batsh said he and his family of seven haven't eaten meat since the war began. A kilogram (2 pounds) of meat costs 200 shekels (around \$50). A live sheep, which could be bought for as little as \$200 before the war, now costs \$1,300 — if it's even available.

"Today, there is only war. No money. No work. Our houses have been destroyed. I have nothing," al-Batsh said.

Iyad al-Bayouk, who owns a now-shuttered cattle farm in southern Gaza, said severe shortages of both livestock and feed due to Israel's blockade have driven up prices. Some local farms have been turned into shelters.

Mohammed Abdel Rahim, who has been sheltering in a building in an empty cattle farm in central Gaza for months, said the farm-turned-shelter was particularly bad in the winter, when it smelled like animals and was infested with bugs. As the heat set in, the ground dried out, making it more bearable, he said.

Abdelkarim Motawq, another displaced Palestinian from northern Gaza, used to work in the local meat industry, which did brisk business ahead of the holiday. This year, his family can only afford rice and beans.

"I wish I could work again," he said. "It was a busy season for me, during which I would bring money home and buy food, clothing, nuts, and meat for my children. But today there's nothing left."

What we know about the fight between conspiracist Alex Jones and Sandy Hook families over his assets

By DAVE COLLINS, JUAN A. LOZANO and JIM VERTUNO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — Bombastic conspiracy theorist Alex Jones has been ordered to liquidate his personal assets as he owes \$1.5 billion for his false claims that the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, which killed 20 first graders and six educators in Newtown, Connecticut, was a hoax.

But the immediate future of his Infowars media platform, and the money behind the business that enriched Jones and connected him to far-right figures, celebrities and politicians, remain uncertain.

The federal bankruptcy judge who ordered the asset liquidation Friday also dismissed a separate bankruptcy case involving Infowars parent company Free Speech Systems.

Before the hearing a combative Jones predicted the end of Infowars could be “very soon,” and the website breathlessly warned that day could be its last broadcast. But he was smiling as he left hours later, calling in to an Infowars show to say, “The bizarre political attempts to hijack the operation have failed.”

The fight over Jones’ assets reached this point after he and Free Speech Systems filed for bankruptcy protection in 2022. That came as relatives of many victims of the Sandy Hook shooting won defamation lawsuit judgments of more than \$1.4 billion in Connecticut and \$49 million in Texas.

Here are some things to know about Jones and Sandy Hook families’ efforts to force him to pay:

Who is Alex Jones and what is Infowars? Jones, a barrel-chested, gravelly voiced Texas native, has spouted conspiracy theories that range from the Sept. 11 terror attacks being staged to a purported U.N. effort regarding world depopulation.

Jones had just finished high school in Austin when he started broadcasting on a public-access television channel in the 1990s. After getting fired from a local radio station, he began broadcasting from home via his Infowars website.

Jones still hosts a daily four-hour talk show on the site. Interview guests this week included former Fox News star Tucker Carlson and British actor Russell Brand.

From just two employees in 2004, Jones grew his business into a media empire that had a 60-person staff by 2010. Court records show his company has four Austin studios and a warehouse for products he sells online, such as dietary supplements with names like Infowars Life Brain Force Plus and Life Super Male Vitality. Much of his revenue came from those sales.

But both Jones and lawyers for the Sandy Hook families said they expect Infowars to cease operations at some point because of the huge debt he now owes them.

The tie to Sandy Hook The shooting had barely happened when Jones began pushing the falsehood that it was a hoax. Victims’ families who sued Jones said they were subjected to years of torment, threats and abuse by people who believed the lies told on his show. One father said conspiracy theorists urinated on his 7-year-old son’s grave and threatened to dig up the coffin.

The families fought back with the lawsuits in Connecticut and Texas.

Testifying in the Texas case, Jones acknowledged in 2022 that the shooting was “100 percent real” and that it was “absolutely irresponsible” to call it a hoax.

How much money does Jones have? Jones has about \$9 million in personal assets including his house, according to court filings in his bankruptcy case, and Friday’s ruling means much of that is to be sold off. But his \$2.6 million primary home in the Austin area and some other belongings are protected from bankruptcy liquidation. He has already moved to sell his Texas ranch, which is worth about \$2.8 million, along with a gun collection and other assets.

The families have a pending lawsuit in Texas accusing Jones of illegally diverting and hiding millions of dollars. He has denied the allegations.

What happens next? It is not immediately clear what will happen to Free Speech Systems and Infowars. Many of the Sandy Hook families had asked that the company also be liquidated.

About the only certainty is more legal fighting. Lawyers involved in the case noted at least two possible scenarios.

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One would be for Infowars and Free Speech Systems to keep operating while efforts to collect on the \$1.5 billion debt are made in state courts in Texas and Connecticut. Or Sandy Hook families could go back to the bankruptcy court and ask the judge to liquidate the company as part of Jones' personal case because he owns the business.

A trustee appointed Friday in Jones' bankruptcy case now has control over his assets, including Infowars, according to lawyers for the families.

One of them, Chris Mattei, called Infowars "soon-to-be defunct" on Friday.

"Today is a good day," Mattei said in a text message. "Alex Jones has lost ownership of Infowars, the corrupt business he has used for years to attack the Connecticut families and so many others."

Jones seemed pleased to still be operating for now.

"Of the two bad outcomes, this is the one that's way better," Jones said. "I have not given up. I'm fighting."

Some hawking stem cells say they can treat almost anything. They can't

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

The mailings promised "Life Without Pain!" via stem cell injections or IVs administered in a patient's own home. The allure was obvious: more than 20% of U.S. adults endure chronic pain.

The flyers invited Iowans to free dinners across the state. Afterward, sales people traveled to potential customers' homes for high-pressure pitches disguised as pre-screenings, according to prosecutors. More than 250 people signed up, paying \$3,200 to \$20,000 each for a total of \$1.5 million. For this, a nurse practitioner came to their homes to administer injections and IVs filled with stem cells derived from umbilical cords.

Yet experts and regulators have alternately labeled such treatments as ripoffs, scams or simply unproven. In some cases, studies have documented real harm.

Last fall, Iowa's attorney general sued two proprietors responsible for the mailings in her state, naming a Minnesota man who hosts a Christian entrepreneurship podcast and his Florida business partner for allegedly deceiving consumers, many of them elderly.

In bringing the lawsuit, Iowa joined attorneys general in New York, North Dakota, Georgia, Nebraska, Arkansas and Washington state who have sued businesses alleging they fraudulently promoted unproven stem cell treatments.

Stem cells have long fascinated researchers because of their ability to reproduce and, in some cases, transform into other cell types. Because of this, they are thought to hold the potential for treating many diseases and injuries.

But the FDA has approved only a handful of such therapies, and only for certain forms of blood cancer and immune system disorders. Stem cells are considered experimental for most uses, despite being marketed as a treatment for everything from autism and emphysema to sports injuries.

The FDA has repeatedly warned Americans to be wary of businesses hawking unapproved, unproven and costly stem cell therapies, which occasionally have caused blindness, bacterial infections and tumors.

In a 2020 notice, the agency expressed concern about patients being misled about products that are "illegally marketed, have not been shown to be safe or effective, and, in some cases, may have significant safety issues."

Dr. Jeffrey Goldberg, chair of ophthalmology at the Byers Eye Institute at Stanford University, whose work has documented vision loss in some patients treated with cells removed from patients' own bodies, processed and reinjected, lamented that people are "desperately willing to shell out large sums of money for unproven and in some cases, explicitly sort of sham, so-called therapeutics."

Since August 2017, the FDA has issued about 30 warning letters regarding the unproven treatments.

Experts, including Dr. Paul Knoepfler, a stem cell researcher at the University of California at Davis, and Leigh Turner, a bioethicist at the University of California, Irvine, are among those who have raised alarm that such federal action is too little to regulate a U.S. industry which Turner estimated in 2021 topped 2,700 clinics.

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Because states can seek substantial fines against wayward operators, Turner said their legal actions offer promise.

"If you look at them collectively, they might over time start to have an impact," he said.

The FDA offers training to attorneys general pursuing such cases. Dr. Peter Marks, director of the FDA's Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research, said federal regulators partner with state law enforcers in a "shared mission."

That puts people like Iowa Attorney General Brenna Bird on the front lines.

Last year, Bird brought the case over mailers offering Iowans a pain-free life, naming the now dissolved Biologics Health and Summit Partners Group, which operated under the name Summit Health Centers, as defendants. The state also sued the companies' proprietors: Rylee Meek, of Prior Lake, Minnesota, and Scott Thomas, of Thonotosassa, Florida.

Neither man claims to have any medical training. Yet over a series of free dinners across Iowa, attendees listened to their presentations about how stem cells could ostensibly repair damage linked to back or joint pain. The claims came despite an FDA warning that no such product has been approved to treat any orthopedic condition.

One testimonial featured a woman quoted as saying she had multiple sclerosis, fibromyalgia, degenerative joint problems and scoliosis. It implied the treatment worked so well she was able to stop using a walker and taking opioids. Prosecutors say that left people believing stem cells are effective at treating all the conditions listed.

The company offered packages ranging from 5 million cells to up to 60 million to fix customers' ailments. Iowa's lawsuit described the practices as "scattershot, for-profit experimentations."

Research has shown dead cells are often injected, Knoepfler said.

The Iowa case is still in the discovery stage, with the trial set for March 2025.

Meek and Thomas did not return multiple text and email messages from The Associated Press. Nor did their attorney, Nathan Russell, though he did rebut many of the allegations in court filings, including that the promotional information was "deceptive or misleading." The filing stressed that Meek and Thomas always emphasized they were not doctors.

Instead, Meek promoted himself as the "\$100 million man" and touted his business prowess on his King's Council podcast. His and Thomas' book, "Intentional Influence in Sales: The Power of Persuasion with Neuro-linguistic Programming," is described as a way to "get people to think the way you want them to think, without them even realizing it."

Meek previously reached a settlement with the North Dakota attorney general to resolve allegations that a business he ran sold insulation and energy conservation products without a proper license.

As for the stem cell business, Bird argued in the Iowa lawsuit that the companies downplayed safety concerns.

Sales material described the most worrisome side effects as "flulike symptoms" in a "very small percentage of patients." It's an assertion that Meek's and Thomas' attorney argued lacked context.

Complaints, which the businessmen described as "rare," trickled in, including from a man whose hip pain hadn't improved after undergoing a \$5,845 treatment. His wife paid \$2,650 for hers. Another person said she had "no improvement whatsoever" after spending \$16,580 to help her sciatic nerve pain and arthritis.

A nurse practitioner responded by telling such patients healing could take longer and they should drink more water, the lawsuit said.

"The problem," Knoepfler said, "is that people actually get hurt and they get ripped off."

Many Senate Republicans were done with Trump after Jan. 6. Now they want him back in the White House

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Three years ago, Donald Trump had few friends left in the Senate.

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell declared in a speech that Trump was “practically and morally responsible” for the violent Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol by spreading “wild falsehoods” about election fraud and trying to overturn his reelection defeat.

After the House impeached Trump for his actions, seven Republicans stood with Democrats and declared Trump guilty. He was acquitted, but several GOP senators — even some who still publicly supported him — distanced themselves from the former president. Many were certain his political future was over.

But it wasn't. Trump is now the party's presumptive nominee to challenge President Joe Biden. And on Thursday, he returned to Capitol Hill to meet with Republicans — the first such official meetings since his presidency — to enthusiastic and near-unanimous support from the Senate GOP conference, including many of the same senators who condemned him for his actions as he tried to block President Joe Biden's legitimate victory. McConnell shook his hand, multiple times, and gave him a fist bump.

The hard feelings, and any memories of the violent end to his presidency, seemed to have faded completely.

“I think that's in the rearview mirror for most people,” South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham said of the 2020 election. “There will always be tension there. But I think most Republicans really see President Trump as the only way to turn this country around. And they're enthusiastic about the chance.”

Republican senators' embrace of the former president comes after years of ups and downs. With a few exceptions, senators have never backed him as consistently and as eagerly as their GOP counterparts in the House. But as he runs again, Senate Republicans are backing Trump more enthusiastically than ever.

The zealous Senate support is partly rooted in self-interest.

Republicans have a good shot at winning the Senate majority in November, and they know Trump's support is key to doing that, especially in solidly Republican states like Ohio and Montana where Democratic incumbents are struggling to hold on.

And they are already starting to talk about what they will do if Trump wins and they gain both chambers of Congress. House Speaker Mike Johnson visited a Senate GOP luncheon Wednesday to discuss the possibility of tax legislation, among other things, if Republicans win full control.

“Our ability to get a majority in the Senate is intrinsically linked to Trump winning,” Republican Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina said after the meeting with Johnson. “So we're like, one team, one vision.”

Texas Sen. John Cornyn, who is running to replace McConnell as GOP leader when he steps down from that post in November, said the party faces a “binary choice” between Trump and Biden.

“There is no Plan B,” said Cornyn, who had called Trump “reckless” after the Capitol attack. “I think people know the strengths and weaknesses of both candidates. And for me, I think President Trump is clearly preferable.”

Also, Cornyn added, “his support is going to be important in a lot of these states where he's very popular, where we have Senate races.”

It's hardly the first time Republicans have returned to supporting Trump after attempting a clean break.

The arguments, and the whiplash, are a familiar pattern. McConnell, for example, fully backed Trump in the days before he was elected in 2016, just weeks after the release of a decade-old tape in which Trump was caught on a hot mic bragging to a celebrity news anchor about grabbing women by their genitalia. McConnell had called Trump's comments “repugnant and unacceptable in any circumstance.”

Many other Republican senators had been cool to Trump on the campaign trail that year and were outraged by the tape. Utah Sen. Mike Lee, now one of Trump's most loyal backers, recorded a video calling on Trump to step aside, saying he was a “distraction from the very principles that will help us win in November.” South Dakota Sen. John Thune, who is also running to replace McConnell, also called on Trump to withdraw from the race. But he later backtracked on those comments.

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Once he was elected, Republican senators publicly united behind Trump, aligned with him on policy and were elated by his conservative picks for the Supreme Court. Most of them defended him through the tumultuous investigations of his campaign's ties to Russia and rarely criticized him, lest they might be called out by the president on social media and face conservative voters' ire.

After Trump lost his reelection, though, very few senators backed his false claims of fraud, especially after the courts rejected multiple lawsuits and the Electoral College certified the votes. Thune and Cornyn both criticized his efforts to overturn his defeat in Congress in the days before Jan. 6, with Thune saying he thought the plan would go down "like a shot dog."

Trump later said on Twitter that Thune was a "RINO," or Republican in name only, whose "political career (is) over!!!"

And after the violence of Jan. 6, few had nice words to say.

"Count me out," said Graham in the hours after Trump supporters violently beat police officers and ransacked the Capitol. "Enough is enough."

But in the weeks, months and years afterward, most of them softened — especially as several Trump allies were newly elected to the Senate and Trump faced several indictments that Republicans see as politically motivated. By early this year, most of the Senate GOP conference had endorsed his third run for the White House, including McConnell, Thune and Cornyn.

By the time he was convicted in a hush money trial in New York late last month, he had a sweeping and united backing from the GOP Senate conference.

"Now more than ever, we need to rally around @realdonaldtrump, take back the White House and Senate, and get this country back on track," Cornyn said in a statement.

Though he struck a positive note in Thursday's Senate meeting, even praising McConnell at one point, Trump's rhetoric hasn't changed much. He still claims the 2020 election was stolen, calls the rioters who were imprisoned for violence on Jan. 6 "hostages" and says he will pardon them, and has consistently bashed the judges who are overseeing his trials.

A handful of senators remain skeptical. Sens. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Susan Collins of Maine, both of whom voted to convict Trump after Jan. 6, skipped the meeting with Trump. Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy, who also voted to convict, and Indiana Sen. Todd Young, who has declined to endorse the former president, both attended but would not answer questions from reporters afterward.

South Dakota Sen. Mike Rounds, whom Trump once called a "jerk" after he said that the former president didn't win reelection, also attended the meeting and has endorsed him. He said Republicans had a good working relationship with Trump until the 2020 election, but "many of us that have disagreed with some of the analysis that was done."

Senators will have to "work our way though that issue," Rounds said, by concentrating on where they can agree.

"We're going to focus on what we need to do to fix the economy, bring back a strong defense, try to put out a lot of the fires that are going on around the world, and focus on the policies," he said.

Biden goes straight from G7 to Hollywood fundraiser, balancing geopolitics with his reelection bid

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Flying through the night across nine time zones, from southern Italy to Southern California, President Joe Biden will shift focus from Russia's challenge of Western unity to raking in big bucks for his reelection campaign at a Hollywood fundraiser featuring George Clooney and Julia Roberts.

Biden went straight from the Group of Seven summit of wealthy democracies, where Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine took center stage, to Los Angeles and the glitzy gathering unfolding Saturday night at the Peacock Theater. The journey was only broken up by a layover to refuel outside Washington.

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Former President Barack Obama is joining the megastar headliners Clooney and Roberts, and late-night host Jimmy Kimmel will interview all of them onstage. In a text message to donors beforehand, Roberts called it "a crucial time in the election." Kimmel wrote in his own text that presumptive Republican nominee Donald Trump "will hate this, so let's do it."

Top luminaries from the entertainment world have increasingly lined up to help Biden's campaign, hoping to provide a fundraising jolt and to energize would-be supporters to turn out ahead of Election Day against Trump.

But hobnobbing with the megastars this time means Biden is skipping a summit in Switzerland about ways to end Russia's war in Ukraine. It's a stark reminder that his responsibilities as president and his reelection effort can sometimes conflict.

"We are going to see an unprecedented and record-setting turnout from the media and entertainment world," Jeffrey Katzenberg, the Hollywood mogul, major Democratic donor and co-chair of Biden's campaign, said in a statement.

A Biden fundraiser in March at Radio City Music Hall, on the other side of the country in Manhattan, featured late-night host Stephen Colbert interviewing the president, Obama and former President Bill Clinton. It raised a then-record-setting \$26 million. The Biden campaign says it is still counting receipts ahead of Saturday's event and likely won't release an expected total until closer to when it starts.

Trump has hauled in even bigger numbers.

He outpaced Biden's New York event in April, raking in \$50.5 million at a gathering of major donors at the Florida home of billionaire investor John Paulson. The former president's campaign and the Republican National Committee announced they had raised a whopping \$141 million in May, padded by tens of millions of dollars in contributions that flowed in after Trump's guilty verdict in his criminal hush money trial.

That post-conviction bump came after Trump and the Republican Party announced collecting \$76 million in April, far exceeding Biden and the Democrats' \$51 million for the month and narrowing a fundraising advantage Biden built earlier in the race.

The money race aside, Biden missing the Ukraine summit means Vice President Kamala Harris is being deployed for her own whirlwind trip — leaving Washington for Switzerland and dashing back in a little more than 24 hours.

At a joint appearance with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the G7 summit, Biden said Harris would be a strong representative of the U.S. in Switzerland. But Zelenskyy previously suggested that Biden's not attending was "not a strong decision."

"I would want President Biden to be personally present," he said late last month, predicting that Putin would "stand and applaud" Biden not coming. Putin and Russian representatives also aren't going to the summit.

In another sign of his day job colliding with his political aims, Biden's fundraiser was expected to attract protests from pro-Palestinian activists angry about his administration's handling of Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza.

Such demonstrations have become common wherever Biden goes in recent months, including outside his Radio City Music Hall fundraiser.

Ukraine employs a flexible defense while waiting for new Western ammo to get to the front

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian firepower has been improving since U.S. lawmakers approved a much-needed military aid package this spring, though not quickly enough to halt the Russian offensive in eastern Ukraine.

Although the influx of Western munitions has shrunk Kyiv's glaring artillery disadvantage, Moscow's forces are still gaining ground along the snaking front line and will likely continue to do so through the summer, when the drier ground and longer days will only aid their push.

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Ukraine is still on the defensive in the Donetsk region, enabling Moscow's forces to inflict heavy losses during Ukrainian troop rotations and bringing them closer to crucial Ukrainian supply routes.

Kyiv has turned to a bend-but-don't-break strategy to buy time until it can get more Western weapons and ammunition to the front. By ceding some territory, Ukraine has been able to fight from better defended positions, according to interviews with senior Ukrainian military leaders, soldiers and officers in the field, and analysts.

Russia's shrinking munitions advantageNew weapons and ammunition have been trickling to the front line since U.S. President Joe Biden signed off on the massive aid package in April. But it will take weeks, if not months, for Ukraine to fully replenish its depleted stocks.

"It takes time to load ships that must then cross the Atlantic," Ivan Havryliuk, Ukraine's first deputy minister of defense, told The Associated Press. "But we're already seeing the (results). Russia's artillery advantage was 7-to-1 at the start of the year, but is down to 5-to-1 now."

Havryliuk said that to neutralize Russian airpower, Ukraine needs at least 130 F-16 fighter jets, which he expects to arrive later this year and early next.

"With time, when we set everything up, we will reach an advantage in our airspace," he said.

The 110th Brigade, which has been fighting near the Russian-occupied village of Ocheretyne, began receiving a trickle of new shells less than a month ago, said Ivan Sekach, a brigade press officer.

The new arrivals have improved the unit's stocks by 75% compared to last winter, when supplies were so low that the military had no choice but to give up ground to save soldiers' lives, he said. But they aren't nearly enough to hold off Russia's advances and often aren't the large calibers that are most needed, said Sekach.

"We need four times this amount to operate without counting each shell and prioritizing what to hit," he said.

Oleksandr, a deputy battalion commander for 47th Brigade who spoke on the condition that only his first name be used in line with his unit's protocols, said the brigade needs more anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles.

"We can't take all the ammunition our partners give us at once — we receive it in portions. And right now, we can't accumulate what we need," said Oleksandr, whose brigade has been fighting on the outskirts of Avdiivka, a city in the Donetsk region that Russian troops overwhelmed in February after a grueling campaign.

Ukraine's "elastic band" strategyUkraine has deployed an elastic defensive strategy to buy time until it's better armed and provisioned. By making painful choices to pull back to better-defended positions, Ukrainian troops are able to fight more efficiently and save personnel, military officials said.

"Time is in the favor of Ukraine and thus the rationale of an elastic band: You can cede a little territory and gain a little time. And then by the end of this year, Ukraine will have advantages that it's never had before," said Dylan Lee Lehrke, an analyst with military intelligence think tank IHS Jane's.

The strategy stands in contrast to the nine-month-long battle for the salt-mining city of Bakhmut, where Ukrainian troops suffered heavy casualties in an ultimately futile attempt to not cede ground.

Sekach said the improved flexibility has helped Ukrainian forces combat the Russian offensive.

"We had to spread out our positions and our logistics, too. We are doing it a lot smarter now," he said before adding, "But don't jinx it," reflecting Ukraine's anxiety about Russia's current battlefield advantage.

Russia's main offensive in the Donetsk region is focused on the areas around the captured Avdiivka and the town of Chasiv Yar, and it is making small but steady gains. Should Chasiv Yar fall, it would put nearby cities in jeopardy, compromise critical Ukrainian supply routes and bring Russia closer to its stated aim of seizing the entire Donetsk region.

Russia now has about 650,000 troops in Ukraine, which is nearly five times the 140,000 it had there two years ago. And Russian tactical changes have proven effective, sending waves of soldiers from different directions to force Ukrainian forces to expend more shells, attacking more frequently at night to exploit Ukraine's weaknesses and inability to effectively counterattack, and even having soldiers don blue-striped Ukrainian helmets to confuse enemy drone operators.

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Dense Russian signal jamming along the front line has reduced the effectiveness of Ukrainian strike drones, Ukrainian commanders said, blaming superior Russian capabilities but also poor communication between Ukrainian electronic warfare and drone units.

"Russians will definitely continue to have minor successes in the next while," said Sekach.

The perils of resupplying the frontRussia's improved targeting of Ukrainian supply routes is having its intended effect, Ukrainian commanders said.

"They understand that we are supplied with new aid and they have increased their (drone) strikes and it influences our logistics," said Ninja, a soldier with the 28th Brigade in Bakhmut who spoke using his call sign per his unit's policy.

So frequent were the attacks on supplies feeding troops in Ninja's unit's area that drivers had to change schedules constantly. "You need to know the road perfectly, every crater, to allow a driver with night vision to drive quickly, come in, unload and get out," he said.

Brigades have had to employ new tactics to supply the front. Regular trucks can be used to deliver ammunition in other combat zones, but in the Chasiv Yar and Avdiivka areas, armored vehicles, smartly plotted routes and supply-carrying drones are necessary.

"Now the delivery is significantly complicated, we are forced to use drones," said Oleksandr. "If before armored vehicles would deliver ammunition two or three times per day, now they generally do so only once a day."

Deadly rotationsImproved Russian targeting is also exacting a heavy cost in Ukrainian blood, especially during the fragile hours between troop rotations.

Russia has become more adept at striking during these windows, when defensive lines are at their weakest, commanders said. One unit in the Chasiv Yar area said a quarter of its casualties happen while transporting troops to and from front-line positions.

Tor, the commander of the Kotyky unit in Chasiv Yar, said Russia's ever-present drones have made it impossible to mask especially large troop movements.

"All day and night they are flying in the sky and observing us, it's impossible to move without being seen," he said.

Tor, who goes by his call sign in keeping with his unit's protocols, said his soldiers have nowhere to hide and change positions because of constant Russian bombardment. Often, they have to run half a kilometer (a third of a mile) or more in the open air to find cover.

"When you're in a basement, you're safe. The minute you come up, you become an easy target," he said.

Doncic scores 29, Mavericks roll past the Celtics 122-84 to avoid a sweep in the NBA Finals

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

DALLAS (AP) — There were two options for the Dallas Mavericks. Pack for Boston, or pack for vacation. Boston awaits.

These NBA Finals are not over, thanks to one of the biggest blowouts in title-round history. Luka Doncic scored 25 of his 29 points in the first half, Kyrie Irving added 21 and the Mavericks emphatically extended their season on Friday night, fending off elimination with a 122-84 rout of the Celtics in Game 4.

The 38-point final margin was the third-biggest ever in an NBA Finals game, behind only Chicago beating Utah 96-54 in 1998 and the Celtics beating the Los Angeles Lakers 131-92 in 2008.

"It's real simple. We don't have to complicate this. This isn't surgery," Mavericks coach Jason Kidd said. "Our group was ready to go. They were ready to celebrate and we made a stand. We were desperate. We've got to continue to keep playing that way. They're trying to close the door. The hardest thing in this league is to close the door when you have a group that has nothing to lose. Tonight, you saw that."

The Mavs' stars were done by the end of the third quarter, with good reason. It was all Dallas from the outset, the Mavs leading by 13 after one quarter, 26 at the half and by as many as 38 in the third before both sides emptied the benches.

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Before Friday, the worst NBA Finals loss for the 17-time champion Celtics was 137-104 to the Lakers in 1984. This was worse. Much worse, at times. Dallas' biggest lead in the fourth was 48 — the biggest deficit the Celtics have faced all season.

The Celtics still lead the series 3-1, and Game 5 is in Boston on Monday.

"Preparation doesn't guarantee an automatic success," Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla said. "I thought we had a great process. I thought we had a great shootaround. Thought we had a great film session yesterday. I thought the guys came out with the right intentions. I just didn't think it went our way, and I thought Dallas outplayed us. They just played harder."

The loss — Boston's first in five weeks — snapped the Celtics' 10-game postseason winning streak, longest in franchise history, plus took away the chance they had at being the first team in NBA history to win both the conference finals and the finals in 4-0 sweeps.

Jayson Tatum scored 15 points, Sam Hauser had 14 while Jaylen Brown and Jrue Holiday each finished with 10 for the Celtics.

Tim Hardaway Jr. scored 15 points, all in the fourth quarter, and Dereck Lively II had 11 points and 12 rebounds for Dallas. It was Lively who provided the hint that it was going to be a good night for the Mavs in the early going. He connected on a 3-pointer — the first of his NBA career — midway through the first quarter, a shot that gave the Mavs the lead for good.

They were off and running. And kept running.

"It doesn't change anything," Doncic said. "Like I said in the beginning of this series, it's the first to four. And we're going to believe until the end. We're just going to keep going. I have big belief in this team that we can do it."

It was 61-35 at the half and Dallas left a ton of points unclaimed in the opening 24 minutes as well. The Mavs went into the break having shot only 5 of 15 from 3-point range, 10 of 16 from the foul line — and they were in total control anyway.

"I think winning is hard. I think winning at any game is hard. But winning Game 4 of the NBA Finals is pretty damn hard," Holiday said. "I think they came out desperate and I think they punched us in the mouth, and we couldn't kind of recover the way we wanted to."

The first-half lowlights for Boston were many, some of them historic:

— The 35 points represented the Celtics' lowest-scoring total in a half, either half, in Mazzulla's two seasons as coach.

— The 26-point halftime deficit was Boston's second biggest of the season. The Celtics trailed Milwaukee by 37 at the break on Jan. 11, one of only eight instances in their first 99 games of this season where they trailed by double figures at halftime.

— The halftime deficit was Boston's largest ever in an NBA Finals game, and the 35-point number was the second-worst by the Celtics in the first half of one. They managed 31 against the Lakers on June 15, 2010, Game 6 of the series that the Lakers claimed with a Game 7 victory.

Teams with a lead of 23 or more points at halftime, even in this season where comebacks looked easier than ever before, were 76-0 this season entering Friday night.

Make it 77-0 now. Doncic's jersey number, coincidentally enough.

The Celtics surely were thinking about how making a little dent in the Dallas lead to open the second half could have made things interesting. Instead, the Mavs put things away and fast; a 15-7 run over the first 4:32 of the third pushed Dallas' lead out to 76-42.

Whatever hope Boston had of a pulling off a huge rally and capping off a sweep was long gone. Mazzulla pulled the starters, all of them, simultaneously with 3:18 left in the third and Dallas leading 88-52.

"I expect us to be much better on Monday," Celtics center Al Horford said.

The Mavs still have the steepest climb possible in this series — no team has successfully rallied from 3-0 down in NBA history — but the first step is done.

"We have nothing to lose," Kidd said.

Alex Jones' personal assets to be sold to pay \$1.5B Sandy Hook debt. Company bankruptcy is dismissed

By DAVE COLLINS and JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — A federal judge on Friday ordered the liquidation of conspiracy theorist Alex Jones' personal assets but dismissed his company's separate bankruptcy case, leaving the immediate future of his Infowars media platform uncertain as he owes \$1.5 billion for his false claims that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting was a hoax.

Judge Christopher Lopez approved converting Jones' proposed personal bankruptcy reorganization to a liquidation. But Lopez threw out the case of his company, Austin, Texas-based Free Speech Systems, after failed attempts by Jones to reach an agreement with Sandy Hook families on his proposals to reorganize and keep operating the company while paying them millions of dollars.

It wasn't immediately clear what will happen in the coming weeks to Free Speech Systems, Infowars' parent company, which Jones built into a multimillion-dollar moneymaker over the past 25 years by selling dietary supplements and other products. But both Jones and lawyers for the Sandy Hook families said they expect Infowars to cease operating at some point because of the huge debt.

A trustee appointed Friday in Jones' personal bankruptcy case to oversee the liquidation now has control over his assets, including Infowars, according to lawyers for Sandy Hook families.

Dismissal of Free Speech Systems' case means the families can now move immediately to collect on the \$1.5 billion in state courts in Texas and Connecticut where they won defamation lawsuits against Jones and the company. It's possible Infowars will continue operating during the collection efforts, which could include selling off the company's assets.

Jones, who smiled as the judge dismissed the company's case, called in to Infowars after the court hearing and predicted more battles in the state courts. "The bizarre political attempts to hijack the operation have failed," he said, and added that he would find another way to broadcast his shows if he loses Infowars.

Outside the courthouse, he railed about the families not accepting his reorganization proposals and alleged that they were being used by political groups in a conspiracy to silence him. He said he would try to maximize revenues at Infowars to make money for creditors and then wind down the business in a way that takes care of its 44 employees.

"This is about taking me off the air," Jones said. "Understand that what you've seen in the corporate media about me, or what I said about Sandy Hook or any of this, has no bearing on reality."

Chris Mattei, a lawyer for the Sandy Hook families, called Infowars "soon-to-be defunct" as his clients move to collect on the debt in state courts. He said the families will also pursue Jones' future earnings.

"Today is a good day," Mattei said in a text message after the hearing. "Alex Jones has lost ownership of Infowars, the corrupt business he has used for years to attack the Connecticut families and so many others. ... Alex Jones is neither a martyr nor a victim. He is the perpetrator of the worst defamation in American history."

Lopez had been asked to either convert Free Speech Systems' bankruptcy reorganization to a liquidation or dismiss the case. He said his sole focus was what would be best for the company and its creditors. He also said Free Speech Systems' case appeared to be one of the longest running of its kind in the country, and it was approaching a deadline to resolve it.

"I was never asked today to make a decision to shut down a show or not. That was never going to happen today one way or another," Lopez said. "This case is one of the more difficult cases I've had. When you look at it, I think creditors are better served in pursuing their state court rights."

Many of Jones' personal assets will be sold off, but his primary home in the Austin area and some other belongings are exempt from bankruptcy liquidation. He already has moved to sell his Texas ranch worth about \$2.8 million, a gun collection and other assets to pay debts.

In the lead-up to Friday's hearing, Jones had been telling his web viewers and radio listeners that Free Speech Systems was on the verge of being shut down because of the bankruptcy. He urged them to download videos from his online archive to preserve them and pointed them to a new website of his fa-

ther's company if they want to continue buying the dietary supplements he sells on his show.

Jones has about \$9 million in personal assets, according to the most recent financial filings in court. Free Speech Systems has about \$6 million in cash on hand and about \$1.2 million worth of inventory, according to J. Patrick Magill, the chief restructuring officer appointed by the court to run the company during the bankruptcy.

During Friday's hearing, lawyers for the Sandy Hook families repeated claims that Jones illegally diverted millions of dollars both before and during the bankruptcies, and questioned his sending his audience to his father's website. The families have a pending lawsuit in Texas accusing Jones of illegally diverting money, which he denies, and said they will continue efforts to claw it back.

Jones and Free Speech Systems filed for bankruptcy protection in 2022, when relatives of many victims of the 2012 school shooting that killed 20 first graders and six educators in Newtown, Connecticut, won lawsuit judgments of more than \$1.4 billion in Connecticut and \$49 million in Texas.

The relatives said they were traumatized by Jones' comments and his followers' actions. They have testified about being harassed and threatened by Jones' believers, some of whom confronted the grieving families in person saying the shooting never happened and their children never existed. One parent said someone threatened to dig up his dead son's grave.

Jones is appealing the judgments in the state courts.

The families in the Connecticut lawsuit, including relatives of eight dead children and adults, had asked that Free Speech Systems' bankruptcy case also be converted to a liquidation. But the parents in the Texas suit — whose child, 6-year-old Jesse Lewis, died — wanted the company's case dismissed, saying it would speed up collection of Jones' debt to them.

Lawyers for the company filed documents indicating it supported liquidation, but attorneys for Jones' personal bankruptcy case wanted the judge to dismiss the company's case.

Supreme Court strikes down Trump-era ban on rapid-fire rifle bump stocks, reopening political fight

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Friday struck down a Trump-era ban on bump stocks, the rapid-fire gun accessories used in the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history, in a ruling that threw firearms back into the nation's political spotlight.

The high court's conservative majority found that the Trump administration overstepped when it changed course from predecessors and banned bump stocks, which allow a rate of fire comparable to machine guns. The decision came after a gunman in Las Vegas attacked a country music festival with semiautomatic rifles equipped with the accessories.

The gunman fired more than 1,000 rounds into the crowd in 11 minutes, sending thousands of people fleeing in terror as hundreds were wounded and dozens killed.

The ruling thrust guns back into the center of the political conversation with an unusual twist as Democrats decried the reversal of a GOP administration's action and many Republicans backed the ruling.

The 6-3 majority opinion written by Justice Clarence Thomas found the Justice Department was wrong to declare that bump stocks transformed semiautomatic rifles into illegal machine guns because, he wrote, each trigger depression in rapid succession still only releases one shot.

The ruling reinforced the limits of executive reach and two justices — conservative Samuel Alito and liberal Sonia Sotomayor — separately highlighted how action in Congress could potentially provide a more lasting policy, if there was political will to act in a bipartisan fashion.

Originally, imposing a ban through regulation rather than legislation during Donald Trump's presidency took pressure off Republicans to act following the massacre and another mass shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida. Prospects for passing gun restrictions in the current divided Congress are dim.

President Joe Biden, who supports gun restrictions, called on Congress to reinstate the ban imposed

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under his political foe. Trump's campaign team meanwhile, expressed respect for the ruling before quickly pivoting to his endorsement by the National Rifle Association.

As Trump courts gun owners while running to retake the presidency, he has appeared to play down his own administration's actions on bump stocks, telling NRA members in February that "nothing happened" on guns during his presidency despite "great pressure." He told the group that if he is elected again, "No one will lay a finger on your firearms."

The 2017 mass shooting in Las Vegas was carried out by a high-stakes gambler who killed himself, leaving his exact motive a mystery. A total of 60 people were killed in the shooting, including Christiana Duarte, whose family called Friday's ruling tragic.

"The ruling is really just another way of inviting people to have another mass shooting," said Danette Meyers, a family friend and spokesperson. "It's unfortunate that they have to relive this again. They're really unhappy."

Republican Nevada Gov. Joe Lombardo, the former county sheriff in Las Vegas who has refused to sign multiple gun control measures the Democrat-controlled Legislature has sent to his desk, said in a statement Friday, "While I have always been a supporter of the Second Amendment, I have been a vocal opponent of bump stocks since my time in law enforcement, and I'm disappointed by the Supreme Court's decision today."

The opinion comes after the same Supreme Court conservative supermajority handed down a landmark decision expanding gun rights in 2022. The high court is also expected to rule in another gun case in the coming weeks, challenging a federal law intended to keep guns away from people under domestic violence restraining orders.

The arguments in the bump stock case, though, were less about Second Amendment rights and more about whether the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, a Justice Department agency, had overstepped its authority.

Bump stocks are accessories that replace a rifle's stock, the part that rests against the shoulder. Invented in the 2000s, they harness the gun's recoil energy so that the trigger bumps against the shooter's stationary finger, allowing the gun to fire at a similar speed as an automatic weapon.

The Supreme Court majority found that the 1934 law against machine guns defined them as weapons that could automatically fire more than one shot by a single function of the trigger. Bump stocks don't fit that definition because "the trigger must still be released and reengaged to fire each additional shot," Thomas wrote. He also pointed to over a decade of ATF's findings that claimed bump stocks weren't automatic weapons.

The plaintiff, Texas gun shop owner and military veteran Michael Cargill, applauded the ruling in a video posted online, predicting the case would have ripple effects by hampering other ATF gun restrictions. "I'm glad I stood up and fought," he said.

In a dissent joined by her liberal colleagues, Justice Sotomayor said that bump stocks fit under the ordinary meaning of the law: "When I see a bird that walks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, I call that bird a duck," she wrote. The ruling, she said, could hamstring the ATF and have "deadly consequences."

ATF Director Steve Dettelbach echoed the sentiment, saying that bump stocks "pose an unacceptable level of risk to public safety."

The high court took up the case after a split among lower courts. Under Republican President George W. Bush and Democrat Barack Obama, the ATF decided that bump stocks didn't transform semiautomatic weapons into machine guns. The agency reversed those decisions at Trump's urging. That was after the Las Vegas massacre and the Parkland, Florida, shooting that left 17 dead.

Sixteen states and the District of Columbia have their own bans on bump stocks that aren't expected to be affected by the ruling, though four state bans may no longer cover bump stocks in the wake of the ruling, according to the gun-control group Everytown.

Cargill was represented by the New Civil Liberties Alliance, a group funded by conservative donors like

the Koch network. His attorneys acknowledged that bump stocks allow for rapid fire but argued that they are different because the shooter has to put in more effort to keep the gun firing.

The Biden administration had argued that effort was minimal, and said the ATF came to the right conclusion on bump stocks after doing a more in-depth examination spurred by the Las Vegas shooting.

There were about 520,000 bump stocks in circulation when the ban went into effect in 2019, requiring people to either surrender or destroy them at a combined estimated loss of \$100 million, the plaintiffs said in court documents.

Speaker Johnson says House will go to court for Biden audio after Justice Dept. refused to prosecute

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Speaker Mike Johnson said Friday that the House will go to court to enforce the subpoena against Attorney General Merrick Garland for access to President Joe Biden's special counsel audio interview, hours after the Justice Department refused to prosecute Republicans' contempt of Congress charge.

"It is sadly predictable that the Biden Administration's Justice Department will not prosecute Garland for defying congressional subpoenas even though the department aggressively prosecuted Steve Bannon and Peter Navarro for the same thing," Johnson said in a statement. "This is yet another example of the two-tiered system of justice brought to us by the Biden Administration."

In a letter to Johnson earlier Friday, a Justice Department official cited the agency's "longstanding position and uniform practice" to not prosecute officials who don't comply with subpoenas because of a president's claim of executive privilege.

The Democratic president last month asserted executive privilege to block the release of the audio, which the White House says Republicans want only for political purposes. Republicans moved forward with the contempt effort anyway, voting Wednesday to punish Garland for refusing to provide the recording.

Assistant Attorney General Carlos Felipe Uriarte noted that the Justice Department under presidents of both political parties has declined to prosecute in similar circumstances when there has been a claim of executive privilege.

Accordingly, the department "will not bring the congressional contempt citation before a grand jury or take any other action to prosecute the Attorney General," Uriarte said in the letter to Johnson. The letter did not specify who in the Justice Department made the decision.

Republicans were incensed when special counsel Robert Hur declined to prosecute Biden over his handling of classified documents and quickly opened an investigation. GOP lawmakers — led by Reps. Jim Jordan and James Comer — sent a subpoena for audio of Hur's interviews with Biden, but the Justice Department only turned over some of the records, leaving out audio of the interview with the president.

Republicans have accused the White House of suppressing the tape because they say the president is afraid to have voters hear it during an election year. A spokesperson for Jordan criticized the Justice Department's move Friday, saying, "The rule of law for thee, but not for me."

A transcript of the Hur interview showed Biden struggling to recall some dates and occasionally confusing some details — something longtime aides say he's done for years in both public and private — but otherwise showing deep recall in other areas. Biden and his aides are particularly sensitive to questions about his age. At 81, he's the oldest-ever president, and he is currently seeking another four-year term.

The attorney general has said the Justice Department has gone to extraordinary lengths to provide information to the lawmakers about Hur's investigation. However, Garland has said releasing the audio could jeopardize future sensitive investigations because witnesses might be less likely to cooperate if they know their interviews might become public.

In a letter last month detailing Biden's decision to assert executive privilege, White House counsel Ed Siskel accused Republicans of seeking the recordings so they can "chop them up" and distort them to attack the president. Executive privilege gives presidents the right to keep information from the courts,

Congress and the public to protect the confidentiality of decision-making, though it can be challenged in court.

The Justice Department noted that it also declined to prosecute Attorney General Bill Barr, who was held in contempt in 2019. The Democratically controlled House voted to issue a referral against Barr after he refused to turn over documents related to a special counsel investigation into former President Donald Trump.

The Justice Department similarly declined to prosecute former Trump White House chief of staff Mark Meadows after he was held in contempt of Congress for ceasing to cooperate with the Jan. 6 Committee investigating the attack on the U.S. Capitol. Years before that, then-Attorney General Eric Holder was held in contempt related to the gun-running operation known as Operation Fast and Furious. The Justice Department also took no action against Holder.

Two former Trump White House officials, Peter Navarro and Steve Bannon, were prosecuted for contempt of Congress for defying subpoenas from the Jan. 6 committee. They were both found guilty at trial and sentenced to four months in prison. Navarro has been behind bars since March, and Bannon has been ordered to report to prison by July 1.

The special counsel in Biden's case, Hur, spent a year investigating the president's improper retention of classified documents, from his time as a senator and as vice president. Hur said he found insufficient evidence to successfully prosecute a case in court.

Hur cited limitations with Biden's memory and the president's cooperation with investigators that "could convince some jurors that he made an innocent mistake." Hur's report also described the president as "someone for whom jurors will want to identify reasonable doubt."

Princess of Wales says she's making 'good progress' in cancer treatment, will attend a public event

By JILL LAWLESS and DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The Princess of Wales said Friday she is "making good progress" in her cancer treatment and will attend King Charles III's ceremonial birthday parade on Saturday, Kate's first public appearance since her diagnosis.

The 42-year-old wife of Prince William has not made any public appearances this year. She announced in March that she was undergoing chemotherapy for an unspecified form of cancer.

"I am making good progress, but as anyone going through chemotherapy will know, there are good days and bad days," Kate said in a statement released Friday, adding that she faces "a few more months" of treatment.

"I'm looking forward to attending The King's Birthday Parade this weekend with my family and hope to join a few public engagements over the summer, but equally knowing I am not out of the woods yet," Kate said.

The announcement is a significant milestone, but does not mark a return to full-time public duties for Kate. The palace issued a new photo of Kate, taken in Windsor earlier this week, showing her next to a tree, dressed casually in jeans and a blazer.

The palace said the king was "delighted" that Kate will attend Trooping the Color, also known as the King's Birthday Parade. It is an annual military parade that marks the monarch's official birthday in June. Charles, who also is being treated for an undisclosed form of cancer, is due to oversee the ceremony, in which troops in full dress uniform parade past the king with their ceremonial flag, or "color."

Kate is expected to travel in a horse-drawn carriage from Buckingham Palace with the couple's children — Prince George, 10; Princess Charlotte, 9; and Prince Louis, who is 6 — before watching the ceremony from a building beside the parade ground. She may also join other royals for a traditional Buckingham Palace balcony appearance.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said the princess' statement was "wonderful news."

"I thought it was brave, I thought it was honest and I'm sure it will bring an enormous amount of com-

fort to so many other people who are grappling with similar health challenges," Sunak said at a Group of Seven summit in Italy.

Kate's announcement in March came after speculation proliferated on social media about her well being and absence from public view. She has revealed few details about her illness, which was discovered after what she described as major abdominal surgery in January.

In a March video message, Kate said the diagnosis had come as "a huge shock, and William and I have been doing everything we can to process and manage this privately for the sake of our young family."

On Friday, Kate thanked members of the public, saying she had been "blown away by all the kind messages of support and encouragement."

"I am learning how to be patient, especially with uncertainty. Taking each day as it comes, listening to my body, and allowing myself to take this much needed time to heal," she said. "Thank you so much for your continued understanding, and to all of you who have so bravely shared your stories with me."

Charles, 75, disclosed his cancer in February, and has recently eased back into public duties. He attended commemorations this week for the 80th anniversary of D-Day, the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe on June 6, 1944.

Charles is likely to travel to Saturday's event by carriage with Queen Camilla and is expected to watch the ceremony seated on a dais, rather than on horseback as he did last year.

Some Mexican shelters see crowding south of the border as Biden's asylum ban takes hold

By VALERIE GONZALEZ Associated Press

MATAMOROS, Mexico (AP) — Some shelters south of the U.S. border are caring for many more migrants now that the Biden administration stopped considering most asylum requests, while others have yet to see much of a change.

The impact appears uneven more than a week after the temporary suspension took effect. Shelters south of Texas and California have plenty of space, while as many as 500 deportations from Arizona each day are straining shelters in Mexico's Sonora state, their directors say.

"We're having to turn people away because we can't, we don't have the room for all the people who need shelter," said Joanna Williams, executive director of Kino Border Initiative, which can take in 100 people at a time.

About 120 are in San Juan Bosco shelter in Nogales, across the border from the Arizona city with the same name, up from about 40 before the policy change, according to its director, Juan Francisco Loureiro.

"We have had a quite remarkable increase," Loureiro said Thursday. Most are Mexican, including families as well as adults. Mexico also agreed to accept deportees from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela.

A shelter in Agua Prieta, a remote town bordering Douglas, Arizona, also began receiving more Mexican men, women and children last weekend — 40 on Sunday, more than 50 on Monday and then about 30 a day. Like those sent to Nogales, most had entered the U.S. farther west, along the Arizona-California state line, according to Perla del Angel, a worker at the Exodus Migrant Attention Center.

Mexicans make up a relatively large percentage of border arrests in much of Arizona compared to other regions, which may help explain why Nogales is affected. Mexicans are generally the easiest nationality to deport because officials only have to drive them to a border crossing instead of arranging a flight.

In Tijuana, directors of four large shelters said this week that they haven't received a single migrant deported since the asylum ban took effect. Al Otro Lado, a migrant advocacy group, consulted only seven migrants on the first full day operating an information booth at the main crossing where migrants are deported from San Diego.

"What there is right now is a lot of uncertainty," said Paulina Olvera, president of Espacio Migrante, who houses up to 40 people traveling in families, predominantly from Mexico, and has others sleeping on the sidewalk outside. "So far what we've seen is the rumors and the mental health impact on people. We haven't seen returns yet."

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Biden administration officials said last week that thousands have been deported since the new rule took effect on July 5, suspending asylum whenever arrests for illegal crossings hit a trigger of 2,500 in a single day. The officials, who briefed reporters on condition of anonymity, were not more specific. The halt will remain in effect until arrests fall below a seven-day daily average of 1,500.

"We are ready to repatriate a record number of people in the coming days," Blas Nuñez-Neto, assistant homeland security secretary for border and immigration policy, told Spanish-language reporters after the policy was announced.

The Homeland Security Department did not immediately respond to a request for figures on Friday and neither did the National Immigration Institute in Mexico.

Mexican authorities, meanwhile, have been sweeping up unauthorized people and moving them well south of the border zone.

Mexican border cities have been heavily strained by earlier U.S. policy shifts, including the Trump-era "Remain in Mexico" plan under which about 70,000 people waited in Mexico for hearings in U.S. immigration court. Immigration advocates launched a federal challenge of the Biden administration policy change on Wednesday.

Some advocates worry that more people will languish in shelters as they try for legal entry through the CBP One app, which grants 1,450 appointments a day. Some migrants at Espacio Migrante have been trying for eight months to get an appointment on CBP One, said Olvera.

Casa del Migrante in Matamoros is now operating at about half its capacity in a network of shelters across the city that together can hold up to 1,600 people. But Berta Alicia Dominguez, its director, expects a bottleneck as more migrants compete for slots through CBP One, and she's seeking help from the Catholic diocese and nongovernmental organizations.

"Food is going to be scarce for the migrants and we hope that the organizations can support us in that situation because feeding 500 people is a real feat," Dominguez said.

Piedras Negras is across the border from Eagle Pass, Texas, a flashpoint in Gov. Greg Abbott's battle with the Biden administration over immigration enforcement. Migration flows peaked there in December, when Casa del Migrante Frontera Digna housed as many as 1,000 migrants.

The shelter had fewer than 150 people on Thursday, but Isabel Turcios, the shelter director, worries about unintended consequences of exempting unaccompanied children from Biden's order.

"We are afraid that many mothers will come and start sending their children alone. That is a big fear we have as well," Turcios said.

Bird flu is highly lethal to some animals, but not to others.

Scientists want to know why

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — In the last two years, bird flu has been blamed for the deaths of millions of wild and domestic birds worldwide. It's killed legions of seals and sea lions, wiped out mink farms, and dispatched cats, dogs, skunks, foxes and even a polar bear.

But it seems to have hardly touched people.

That's "a little bit of a head scratcher," although there are some likely explanations, said Richard Webby, a flu researcher at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. It could have to do with how infection occurs or because species have differences in the microscopic docking points that flu viruses need to take root and multiply in cells, experts say.

But what keeps scientists awake at night is whether that situation will change.

"There's a lot we don't understand," said Dr. Tom Frieden, a former CDC director who currently heads Resolve to Save Lives, a not-for-profit that works to prevent epidemics. "I think we have to get over the 'hope for the best and bury our head in the sand' approach. Because it could be really bad."

Some researchers theorize that flu viruses that originated in birds were the precursors to terrible scourges in humans, including pandemics in 1918 and 1957. Those viruses became deadly human contagions and

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spread in animals and people.

A number of experts think it's unlikely this virus will become a deadly global contagion, based on current evidence. But that's not a sure bet.

Just in case, U.S. health officials are readying vaccines and making other preparations. But they are holding off on bolder steps because the virus isn't causing severe disease in people and they have no strong evidence it's spreading from person to person.

The flu that's currently spreading — known as H5N1 — was first identified in birds in 1959. It didn't really begin to worry health officials until a Hong Kong outbreak in 1997 that involved severe human illnesses and deaths.

It has caused hundreds of deaths around the world, the vast majority of them involving direct contact between people and infected birds. When there was apparent spread between people, it involved very close and extended contact within households.

Like other viruses, however, the H5N1 virus has mutated over time. In the last few years, one particular strain has spread alarmingly quickly and widely.

In the United States, animal outbreaks have been reported at dozens of dairy cow farms and more than 1,000 poultry flocks, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Four human infections have been reported among the hundreds of thousands of people who work at U.S. poultry and dairy farms, though that may be an undercount.

Worldwide, doctors have detected 15 human infections caused by the widely circulating bird flu strain. The count includes one death — a 38-year-old woman in southern China in 2022 — but most people had either no symptoms or only mild ones, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

There's no way to know how many animals have been infected, but certain creatures seem to be getting more severe illnesses.

Take cats, for example. Flu is commonly thought of as a disease of the lungs, but the virus can attack and multiply in other parts of the body too. In cats, scientists have found the virus attacking the brain, damaging and clotting blood vessels and causing seizures and death.

Similarly gruesome deaths have been reported in other animals, including foxes that ate dead, infected birds.

The flu strain's ability to lodge in the brain and nervous system is one possible reason for "higher mortality rate in some species," said Amy Baker, an Iowa-based U.S. Department of Agriculture scientist who studies bird flu in animals. But scientists "just don't know what the properties of the virus or the properties of the host are that are leading to these differences," Baker said.

Unlike cats, cows have been largely spared. Illnesses have been reported in less than 10% of the cows in affected dairy herds, according to the USDA. Those that did develop symptoms experienced fever, lethargy, decreased appetite and increased respiratory secretions.

Cow infections largely have been concentrated in the udders of lactating animals. Researchers investigating cat deaths at dairy farms with infected cows concluded the felines caught the virus from drinking raw milk.

Researchers are still sorting out how the virus has been spreading from cow to cow, but studies suggest the main route of exposure is not the kind of airborne droplets associated with coughing and sneezing. Instead it's thought to be direct contact, perhaps through shared milking equipment or spread by the workers who milk them.

Then there's the issue of susceptibility. Flu virus need to be able to latch onto cells before they can invade them.

"If it doesn't get into a cell, nothing happens. ... The virus just swims around," explained Juergen Richt, a researcher at Kansas State University.

But those docking spots — sialic acid receptors — aren't found uniformly throughout the body, and differ among species. One recent study documented the presence of bird flu-friendly receptors in dairy cattle mammary glands.

Eye redness has been a common symptom among people infected by the current bird flu strain. People who milk cows are eye level with the udders, and splashes are common. Some scientists also note that

the human eye has receptors that the virus can bind to.

A study published this month found ferrets infected in the eyes ended up dying, as the researchers demonstrated that the virus could be as deadly entering through the eyes as through the respiratory tract.

Why didn't the same happen in the U.S. farmworkers?

Some experts wonder whether people have some level of immunity, due to past exposure to other forms of flu or to vaccinations. However, a study in which human blood samples were exposed to the virus indicated there's little to no existing immunity to this version of the virus, including among people who'd had seasonal flu shots.

A more menacing question: What happens if the virus mutates in a way that makes it more lethal to people or allows it to spread more easily?

Pigs are a concern because they are considered ideal mixing vessels for bird flu to potentially combine with other flu viruses to create something more dangerous. Baker has been studying the current strain in pigs and found it can replicate in the lungs, but the disease is very mild.

But that could all change, which is why there's a push in the scientific community to ramp up animal testing.

Frieden, of Resolve to Save Lives, noted public health experts have been worried about a deadly new flu pandemic for a long time.

"The only thing predictable about influenza is it's unpredictable," he said.

US Navy faces its most intense combat since World War II against Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

ABOARD THE USS LABOON IN THE RED SEA (AP) — The U.S. Navy prepared for decades to potentially fight the Soviet Union, then later Russia and China, on the world's waterways. But instead of a global power, the Navy finds itself locked in combat with a shadowy, Iran-backed rebel group based in Yemen.

The U.S.-led campaign against the Houthi rebels, overshadowed by the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip, has turned into the most intense running sea battle the Navy has faced since World War II, its leaders and experts told The Associated Press.

The combat pits the Navy's mission to keep international waterways open against a group whose former arsenal of assault rifles and pickup trucks has grown into a seemingly inexhaustible supply of drones, missiles and other weaponry. Near-daily attacks by the Houthis since November have seen more than 50 vessels clearly targeted, while shipping volume has dropped in the vital Red Sea corridor that leads to the Suez Canal and into the Mediterranean.

The Houthis say the attacks are aimed at stopping the war in Gaza and supporting the Palestinians, though it comes as they try to strengthen their position in Yemen. All signs suggest the warfare will intensify — putting U.S. sailors, their allies and commercial vessels at more risk.

"I don't think people really understand just kind of how deadly serious it is what we're doing and how under threat the ships continue to be," Cmdr. Eric Blomberg with the USS Laboon told the AP on a visit to his warship on the Red Sea.

"We only have to get it wrong once," he said. "The Houthis just have to get one through."

Seconds to act The pace of the fire can be seen on the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, where the paint around the hatches of its missile pods has been burned away from repeated launches. Its sailors sometimes have seconds to confirm a launch by the Houthis, confer with other ships and open fire on an incoming missile barrage that can move near or beyond the speed of sound.

"It is every single day, every single watch, and some of our ships have been out here for seven-plus months doing that," said Capt. David Wroe, the commodore overseeing the guided missile destroyers.

One round of fire on Jan. 9 saw the Laboon, other vessels and F/A-18s from the aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower shoot down 18 drones, two anti-ship cruise missiles and a ballistic missile launched by the Houthis.

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Nearly every day — aside from a slowdown during the holy Muslim fasting month of Ramadan — the Houthis launch missiles, drones or some other type of attack in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the narrow Bab el-Mandeb Strait that connects the waterways and separates Africa from the Arabian Peninsula.

The Navy saw periods of combat during the “Tanker Wars” of the 1980s in the Persian Gulf, but that largely involved ships hitting mines. The Houthi assaults involve direct attacks on commercial vessels and warships.

“This is the most sustained combat that the U.S. Navy has seen since World War II — easily, no question,” said Bryan Clark, a former Navy submariner and a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. “We’re sort of on the verge of the Houthis being able to mount the kinds of attacks that the U.S. can’t stop every time, and then we will start to see substantial damage. ... If you let it fester, the Houthis are going to get to be a much more capable, competent, experienced force.”

Dangers at sea and in the air While the Eisenhower appears to largely stay at a distance, destroyers like the Laboon spend six out of seven days near or off Yemen — the “weapons engagement zone,” in Navy speak.

Sea combat in the Mideast remains risky, something the Navy knows well. In 1987, an Iraqi fighter jet fired missiles that struck the USS Stark, a frigate on patrol in the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq war, killing 37 sailors and nearly sinking the vessel.

There’s also the USS Cole, targeted in 2000 by boat-borne al-Qaida suicide bombers during a refueling stop in Yemen’s port city of Aden, which killed 17 on board. AP journalists saw the Cole patrolling the Red Sea with the Laboon on Wednesday, the same day the Houthis launched a drone-boat attack against a commercial ship there that disabled the vessel.

That commercial ship was abandoned on Friday and left adrift and unlit in the Red Sea, the British military’s United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations center said.

Rear Adm. Marc Miguez, the Navy’s commander for its Carrier Strike Group Two, which includes the Eisenhower and supporting ships, said the Navy had taken out one underwater bomb-carrying drone launched by the Houthis as well during the campaign.

“We currently have pretty high confidence that not only is Iran providing financial support, but they’re providing intelligence support,” Miguez said. “We know for a fact the Houthis have also gotten training to target maritime shipping and target U.S. warships.”

Asked if the Navy believed Iran picks targets for the Houthis, Miguez would only say there was “collaboration” between Tehran and the rebels. He also noted Iran continues to arm the Houthis, despite U.N. sanctions blocking weapons transfers to them.

Iran’s mission to the United Nations told the AP that Tehran “is adept at thwarting the U.S. strategy in a way that not only strengthens (the Houthis) but also ensures compliance with the pertinent resolutions.”

The risk isn’t just on the water. The U.S.-led campaign has carried out numerous airstrikes targeting Houthi positions inside Yemen, including what the U.S. military describes as radar stations, launch sites, arsenals and other locations. One round of U.S. and British strikes on May 30 killed at least 16 people, the deadliest attack acknowledged by the rebels.

The Eisenhower’s air crews have dropped over 350 bombs and fired 50 missiles at targets in the campaign, said Capt. Marvin Scott, who oversees all the air group’s aircraft. Meanwhile, the Houthis apparently have shot down multiple MQ-9 Reaper drones with surface-to-air missile systems.

“The Houthis also have surface-to-air capabilities that we have significantly degraded, but they are still present and still there,” Scott said. “We’re always prepared to be shot at by the Houthis.”

A stalemated war Officers acknowledge some grumbling among their crew, wondering why the Navy doesn’t strike harder against the Houthis. The White House hasn’t discussed the Houthi campaign at the same level as negotiations over the Israel-Hamas war.

There are several likely reasons. The U.S. has been indirectly trying to lower tensions with Iran, particularly after Tehran launched a massive drone-and-missile attack on Israel and now enriches uranium closer than ever to weapons-grade levels.

Meanwhile, there’s the Houthis themselves. The rebel group has battled a Saudi-led coalition into a

stalemate in a wider war that's killed more than 150,000 people, including civilians, and created one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters.

The U.S. directly fighting the Houthis is something the leaders of the Zaydi Shiite group likely want. Their motto long has been "God is the greatest; death to America; death to Israel; curse the Jews; victory to Islam." Combating the U.S. and siding publicly with the Palestinians has some in the Mideast praising the rebels.

While the U.S. and European partners patrol the waterways, Saudi Arabia largely has remained quiet, seeking a peace deal with the Houthis. Reports suggest some Mideast nations have asked the U.S. not to launch attacks on the Houthis from their soil, making the Eisenhower's presence even more critical. The carrier has had its deployment extended, while its crew has had only one port call since its deployment a week after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel.

Meanwhile, the Houthi attacks continue to depress shipping through the region. Revenue for Egypt from the Suez Canal — a key source of hard currency for its struggling economy — has halved since the attacks began. AP journalists saw a single commercial ship moving through the once-busy waterway.

"It's almost a ghost town," Blomberg acknowledged.

G7 leaders agree to lend Ukraine billions backed by Russia's frozen assets. Here's how it will work

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Leaders of the Group of Seven wealthy democracies have agreed to engineer a \$50 billion loan to help Ukraine in its fight for survival. Interest earned on profits from Russia's frozen central bank assets would be used as collateral.

Details of the deal were being hashed out by G7 leaders at their summit in Italy. The money could reach Kyiv before the end of the year, according to U.S. and French officials.

President Joe Biden told reporters at a news conference Thursday that the move was part of a "historic agreement." Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, said providing a loan through Russia's assets "is a vital step forward in providing sustainable support for Ukraine in winning this war."

Here's how the plan would work:

Where would the money come from? Most of the money would be in the form of a loan mostly guaranteed by the U.S. government, backed by profits being earned on roughly \$260 billion in immobilized Russian assets. The vast majority of that money is held in European Union nations.

A French official said the loan could be "topped up" with European money or contributions from other countries. The White House said Canada will loan Ukraine up to \$5 billion, while European countries have expressed interest in sending as much as half of the total package. Japan has also said it intends to help fund Ukraine — though its laws require the money to go to Ukraine's budget, not its war effort.

The G7 leaders' official statement also left the door open to trying to confiscate the Russian assets entirely.

Why not just give Ukraine the frozen assets? That's much harder to do.

For more than a year, officials from multiple countries have debated the legality of confiscating the money and sending it to Ukraine.

The U.S. and its allies immediately froze whatever Russian central bank assets they had access to when Moscow invaded Ukraine in 2022. That basically was money being held in banks outside Russia.

The assets are immobilized and cannot be accessed by Moscow, but they still belong to Russia.

While governments can generally freeze property or funds without difficulty, turning them into forfeited assets that can be used for the benefit of Ukraine requires an extra layer of judicial procedure, including a legal basis and adjudication in a court.

The EU instead has set aside the profits being generated by the frozen assets. That pot of money is easier to access.

Separately, the U.S. this year passed a law called the REPO Act — short for the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity for Ukrainians Act — that allows the Biden administration to seize \$5 billion in

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Russian state assets in the U.S. and use them for the benefit of Kyiv. That arrangement is being worked out. How could the loan be used and how soon? It will be up to technical experts to work through the details.

Ukraine will be able to spend the money in several areas, including for military, economic and humanitarian needs and reconstruction, the U.S. official said.

Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, said the goal is "to provide the necessary resources to Ukraine now for its economic energy and other needs so that it's capable of having the resilience necessary to withstand Russia's continuing aggression."

Another goal is to get the money to Ukraine quickly.

The French official, who was not authorized to be publicly named according to French presidential policy, said the details could be worked out "very quickly and in any case, the \$50 billion will be disbursed before the end of 2024."

Beyond the costs of the war, the needs are great.

The World Bank's latest damage assessment of Ukraine, released in February, estimates that costs for reconstruction and recovery of the nation stand at \$486 billion over the next 10 years.

The move to unlock Russia's assets comes after there was a long delay in Washington by Congress in approving military aid for Ukraine.

At an Atlantic Council event previewing the G7 summit, a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, John Herbst, said "the fact that American funding is not quite reliable is a very important additional reason to go that route."

Who would be on the hook in the case of a default? If Russia regained control of its frozen assets or if the immobilized funds were not generating enough interest to pay back the loan, "then the question of burden-sharing arises," according to the French official.

Max Bergmann, director of the Europe, Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said last week that there were worries among European finance ministers that their countries "will be left holding the bag if Ukraine defaults."

Some nations are critical of the plan to seize Russian assets.

Chinese Embassy spokesman Liu Pengyu told The Associated Press that the U.S. is "fueling the fight and inciting confrontation."

"We urge the U.S. to immediately stop slapping illegal unilateral sanctions and play a constructive role in ending the conflict and restoring peace."

G7 leaders tackle migration, AI and economic security on second and final day of summit in Italy

By ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

BARI, Italy (AP) — The Group of Seven leading industrialized nations turned their attention to migration, artificial intelligence, economic security and the Indo-Pacific region on Friday, the second and final day of their summit in Italy. The G7 leaders stressed their determination to meet global challenges "at a crucial moment in history."

The gathering in a luxury resort in Italy's southern Puglia region also discussed other major topics, such as financial support for Ukraine, the war in Gaza, climate change, Iran, the situation in the Red Sea, gender equality and China's industrial policy and economic security.

"We are working together and with others to address the pressing challenges of our time," the G7 leaders said in a final communique, noting their solidarity with Ukraine, support for a deal that would lead to an immediate cease-fire and release of hostages in Gaza, investment in sustainable infrastructure in Africa and commitments to address climate change and migration.

Divisions did emerge during the summit, however, notably over the lack of a reference to abortion in the summit's final declaration.

Asked if the G7 gathering has lived up to expectations, French President Emmanuel Macron was circumspect.

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"The aim of the G7 is to create convergence and be able to remove misunderstandings. It's not a place where you decide emergency measures or regulate things," he said, adding that there was "true convergences on Ukraine and Mideast."

"It was a useful G7, with useful results," Macron said. "The coming weeks will create the conditions for political opportunities in particular around the two conflicts."

Migration was the first topic of discussions Friday, with the leaders mulling ways to combat trafficking and increase investment in countries from where migrants start out on often life-threatening journeys.

The issue is of particular interest to summit host Italy, which lies on one of the major routes into the European Union for people fleeing war and poverty in Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

Right-wing Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni, known for her hard-line stance on migration, has been eager to increase investment and funding for African nations as a means of reducing migratory pressure on Europe.

The leaders "launched the G7 Coalition to prevent and counter the smuggling of migrants," the summit's final declaration said, noting the seven nations would "focus on the root causes of irregular migration, efforts to enhance border management and curb transnational organized crime, and safe and regular pathways for migration."

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said he and Meloni - who he described as "fantastic" - saw "eye to eye" on migration.

"We can't have criminal gangs decide who comes to our countries," Sunak said.

Meloni has a controversial five-year deal with neighboring Albania for the Balkan country to host thousands of asylum-seekers while Italy processes their claims. She has also spearheaded the "Mattei Plan" for Africa, a continent-wide strategy to increase economic opportunities at home and so discourage migration.

For its part, Britain has a deal to deport some asylum seekers to Rwanda, although no flights have yet taken off. Human rights organizations have blasted the agreement as unethical and unworkable.

The United States has also been struggling with a growing number of migrants. President Joe Biden introduced new policies to curb migration after a bill he tried to get through Congress failed to pass. However, the future of the new policies is unclear after immigrant rights advocates challenged them with lawsuits.

Apart from the G7 nations of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the U.S., the Italian hosts also invited several African leaders — Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, Kenyan President William Ruto and Tunisian President Kais Saied — to press Meloni's migration and development initiatives.

But rights groups decried what they said was a lack of ambition in support for developing countries.

The ONE Campaign, which advocates for investment in Africa, said it had found the G7 and EU institutions' share of aid going to Africa was at its lowest point since 1973.

"Without any concrete action, the G7 in Italy amounts to no more than pointless platitudes," said David McNair, executive director at The ONE Campaign. Although the summit's final statement "reflects promises of increased partnership between the G7 and Africa, there are very few specifics on what new financing, if any, will be available."

Pope Francis also became the first pontiff to address a G7 summit, delivering a speech on artificial intelligence. Other invitees include Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

The summit opened Thursday with a strong show of support for Kyiv: an agreement on a U.S. proposal to back a \$50 billion loan to Ukraine using frozen Russian assets as collateral.

Russian President Vladimir Putin denounced the freezing of Russian assets as "theft" and vowed it "will not go unpunished."

Biden also signed a bilateral security agreement with Zelenskyy, aiming to send a signal to Russia of American resolve in supporting Kyiv.

But some cracks appeared among the G7 leaders, notably French President Emmanuel Macron deploring a lack of a reference to abortion in the summit's final document.

The statement after last year's summit in Hiroshima, Japan, expressed a commitment to provide access to safe and legal abortion to women and girls, and pledged to defend gender equality and the rights of

members of the LGBTQ+ community.

The word "abortion" was absent from this year's final communique, although it included a reference to promoting sexual and reproductive health rights.

"It was not possible to reach agreement on these things in the room," a senior EU official said, speaking on condition of anonymity to reveal details of the private discussions.

Asked on Thursday about reports that abortion would not be included in the final text, Macron said it was something he regretted. France "has included women's right to abortion, the freedom of decision on one's own body, into its Constitution," he said, adding that France defends "this vision of equality between women and men."

"It's not a vision that's shared across all the political spectrum," Macron said, replying to a question from a reporter.

Meloni, who campaigned on a "God, Family, Fatherland" motto, has denied she is rolling back rights to abortions, which have been legal in Italy since 1978. But the center-left opposition has warned that her initiatives are chipping away at those rights, including by giving pro-life groups access to women considering abortions.

The Supreme Court's ruling on mifepristone isn't the last word on the abortion pill

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

The Supreme Court's ruling on technical grounds Thursday keeps the abortion pill mifepristone available in the U.S. for now, but it won't be the last word on the issue, and the unanimous opinion offers some clues for how abortion opponents can keep trying to deny it to women nationwide.

Some state attorneys general have indicated that they'll press ahead, though they haven't laid out exactly how.

And while the ruling said the anti-abortion doctors who brought the lawsuit failed to show they've been harmed when others use the drug, that might not stop some other plaintiff from a successful challenge.

"The decision is good that the doctors don't have standing," said Dr. Rebecca Gomperts, director of Aid Access, an abortion pill supplier working with U.S. providers. "The problem is, the decision should have said that nobody has standing in this case – that only the women have standing."

Justice Brett Kavanaugh's opinion even provides a road map for people with "sincere concerns about and objections to others using mifepristone and obtaining abortions."

"Citizens and doctors who object to what the law allows others to do may always take their concerns to the Executive and Legislative Branches and seek greater regulatory or legislative restrictions on certain activities," he wrote.

That route would be more likely to work for them if Republican Donald Trump is elected president in November than if Joe Biden remains in office.

The Alliance for Hippocratic Medicine sued the Food and Drug Administration in 2022, a few months after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* and ended the nationwide right to abortion. Most GOP-controlled states had implemented new bans or limits on abortion by then. The anti-abortion doctors sought a ruling that would apply nationwide, asking judges to find that the FDA wrongly approved and eased access to mifepristone.

A federal judge in Texas and the New Orleans-based U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals validated many of the group's arguments, making some Democratic-controlled states nervous enough to stockpile abortion pills.

Most medication abortions use a combination of mifepristone, which is also used in miscarriage care, and another, misoprostol. The latter drug can also be used alone — but women are more likely to experience side effects that way.

About half the abortions across the nation involved such pills before *Roe* was overturned. By last year,

the medication was used in nearly two-thirds, one survey found. Providers in some states are using telehealth appointments to prescribe and mail them to women in states with bans or restrictions. Underground networks distribute them, too.

After the doctors group filed suit, represented by Alliance Defending Freedom, a conservative Christian law firm, Republican attorneys general for Idaho, Kansas and Missouri tried to get involved. They were allowed into the case by U.S. District Judge Matthew Kacsmaryk, then denied an intervening role by the Supreme Court.

David S. Cohen, a law professor at Drexel University who studies abortion-related law, said that normally, intervenors like the states would not be allowed to continue if the main parties have their claims dismissed because they lack standing, but that's not yet clear in this case, and the attorneys general aren't giving up.

"We are moving forward undeterred with our litigation to protect both women and their unborn children," Missouri Attorney General Andrew Bailey said on X.

When they were trying to intervene, the attorneys general contended that allowing mifepristone interferes with their ability to enforce their states' abortion bans, and that state taxpayers could have to pay emergency room bills when women who use it have complications.

It's no sure thing that the Supreme Court would accept such arguments as a reason to give the states standing, said Mary Ziegler, a historian at the University of California, Davis School of Law who studies abortion. "The court is leery of things that are speculative," she said.

However, Ziegler said in a post on X Thursday that "One could read parts of this opinion as creating a roadmap to future plaintiffs."

And she noted that the ruling made no mention of the Comstock Act, a 19th-century federal vice law that conservatives have argued can be invoked to prevent abortion pills from being shipped across state lines. The Biden administration does not interpret it that way — but another might. And if an abortion opponent takes charge as U.S. Health and Human Services secretary, they could revoke or alter the Food and Drug Administration's approval of mifepristone.

Still another approach could be for Republican states to challenge the shield laws that seek to protect healthcare providers in some Democratic-controlled states when they prescribe pills to patients in states with abortion bans.

Jillian Phillips, a mother in North Brookfield, Massachusetts, who took mifepristone to help pass the remains of a pregnancy when she miscarried eight years ago, said it's hard for her to think of Thursday's ruling as a win for abortion rights, because of all it could lead to.

"My fear is always that when we make a step forward," she said, abortion opponents "get even more desperate to put even more barriers in place and restrict things even further."

Pope Francis becomes first pontiff to address a G7 summit, raising alarm about AI. The G7 responds

By NICOLE WINFIELD and KELVIN CHAN Associated Press

BARI, Italy (AP) — Pope Francis challenged leaders of the world's wealthy democracies on Friday to keep human dignity foremost in developing and using artificial intelligence, warning that such powerful technology risks turning human relations themselves into mere algorithms.

Francis brought his moral authority to bear on the Group of Seven, invited by host Italy to address a special session at their annual summit on the perils and promises of AI. In doing so, he became the first pope to attend the G7, offering an ethical take on an issue that is increasingly on the agenda of international summits, government policy and corporate boards alike.

Francis said politicians must take the lead in making sure AI remains human-centric, so that decisions about when to use weapons or even less-lethal tools always remain made by humans and not machines.

"We would condemn humanity to a future without hope if we took away people's ability to make decisions about themselves and their lives, by dooming them to depend on the choices of machines," he said.

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"We need to ensure and safeguard a space for proper human control over the choices made by artificial intelligence programs: Human dignity itself depends on it."

The G7 final statement largely reflected his concerns.

The leaders vowed to better coordinate the governance and regulatory frameworks surrounding AI to keep it "human-centered." At the same time, they acknowledged the potential impacts on the labor markets of machines taking the place of human workers and on the justice system of algorithms predicting recidivism.

"We will pursue an inclusive, human-centered, digital transformation that underpins economic growth and sustainable development, maximizes benefits, and manages risks, in line with our shared democratic values and respect for human rights," they said.

By attending the summit, Francis joined a chorus of countries and global bodies pushing for stronger guardrails on AI following the boom in generative AI kickstarted by OpenAI's ChatGPT chatbot.

The Argentine pope used his annual peace message this year to call for an international treaty to ensure AI is developed and used ethically. In it, he argued that a technology lacking human values of compassion, mercy, morality and forgiveness is too perilous to develop unchecked.

He didn't repeat that call explicitly in his speech Friday, but he made clear the onus is on politicians to lead on the issue. He also urged them to ultimately ban the use of lethal autonomous weapons, colloquially known as "killer robots."

"No machine should ever choose to take the life of a human being," he said.

On the weapons issue, the G7 leaders said they recognized the impact of AI in the military domain "and the need for a framework for responsible development and use." They encouraged states to make sure "military use of AI is responsible, complies with applicable international law, particularly international humanitarian law, and enhances international security."

Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni had invited Francis and announced his participation, knowing the potential impact of his star power and moral authority on the G7. Those seated at the table seemed duly awed, and the boisterous buzz in the room went absolutely quiet when Francis arrived.

"The pope is, well, a very special kind of a celebrity," said John Kirton, a political scientist at the University of Toronto who directs the G7 Research Group think tank.

Kirton recalled the last summit that had this kind of star power, that then translated into action, was the 2005 meeting in Gleneagles, Scotland. There, world leaders decided to wipe out the \$40 billion of the debts owed by 18 of the world's poorest countries to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

That summit was preceded by a Live 8 concert in London that featured Sting, The Who and a reformed Pink Floyd and drew over a million people in a show of solidarity against hunger and poverty in Africa.

"Gleneagles actually hit a home run and for some it's one of the most successful summits," Kirton said.

No such popular pressure was being applied to G7 leaders in the Italian region of Puglia, but Francis knew he could wield his own moral authority to renew his demands for safeguards for AI and highlight the threats to peace and society it poses if human ethics are left to the side.

"To speak of technology is to speak of what it means to be human and thus of our singular status as beings who possess both freedom and responsibility," he said. "This means speaking about ethics."

Generative AI technology has dazzled the world with its capabilities to produce humanlike-responses, but it's also sparked fears about AI safety and led to a jumble of global efforts to rein it in.

Some worry about catastrophic but far off risks to humanity because of its potential for creating new bioweapons and supercharging disinformation. Others fret about its effect on everyday life, through algorithmic bias that results in discrimination or AI systems that eliminate jobs.

In his peace message, Francis echoed those concerns and raised others. He said AI must keep foremost concerns about guaranteeing fundamental human rights, promoting peace and guarding against disinformation, discrimination and distortion.

On the regulation front, Francis was in some ways preaching to the converted as the G7 members have been at the forefront of the debate on AI oversight.

Japan, which held the G7's rotating presidency last year, launched its Hiroshima AI process to draw up

international guiding principles and a code of conduct for AI developers. Adding to those efforts, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida last month unveiled a framework for global regulation of generative AI, which are systems that can quickly churn out new text, images, video, audio in response to prompts and commands.

The European Union was one of the first movers with its wide-ranging AI Act that's set to take effect over the next two years and could act as a global model. The act targets any AI product or service offered in the bloc's 27 nations, with restrictions based on the level of risk they pose.

In the United States, President Joe Biden issued an executive order on AI safeguards and called for legislation to strengthen it, while some states like California and Colorado have been trying to pass their own AI bills, with mixed results.

Britain kickstarted a global dialogue on reining in AI's most extreme dangers with a summit last fall. At a followup meeting in Seoul, companies pledged to develop the technology safely. France is set to host another meeting in the series early next year. The United Nations has also weighed in with its first resolution on AI.

Putin offers truce if Ukraine exits Russian-claimed areas and drops NATO bid. Kyiv rejects it

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

Russian President Vladimir Putin promised Friday to "immediately" order a cease-fire in Ukraine and start negotiations if Kyiv began withdrawing troops from the four regions annexed by Moscow in 2022 and renounced plans to join NATO. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy rejected what he called an ultimatum by Putin to surrender more territory.

Putin's remarks came as Switzerland prepared to host scores of world leaders -- but not from Moscow -- this weekend to try to map out first steps toward peace in Ukraine.

They also coincided with a meeting of leaders of the Group of Seven leading industrialized nations in Italy and after the U.S. and Ukraine this week signed a 10-year security agreement that Russian officials, including Putin, denounced as "null and void."

Putin blasted the Switzerland conference as "just another ploy to divert everyone's attention, reverse the cause and effect of the Ukrainian crisis (and) set the discussion on the wrong track."

His demands came in a speech at the Russian Foreign Ministry and was aimed at what he called a "final resolution" of the conflict rather than "freezing it," and stressed the Kremlin is "ready to start negotiations without delay."

Broader demands for peace that Putin listed included Ukraine's recognition of Crimea as part of Russia, keeping the country's nonnuclear status, restricting its military force and protecting the interests of the Russian-speaking population. All of these should be part of "fundamental international agreements," and all Western sanctions against Russia should be lifted, Putin said.

"We're urging to turn this tragic page of history and to begin restoring, step-by-step, the unity between Russia and Ukraine and in Europe in general," he said.

Putin's remarks, made to a group of somber Foreign Ministry officials and some senior lawmakers, represented a rare occasion in which he clearly laid out his conditions for ending the war in Ukraine, but it didn't include any new demands. The Kremlin has said before that Kyiv should recognize its territorial gains and drop its bid to join NATO.

Zelenskyy, in Italy for the G7 meeting, said Putin's proposal was not new and was in the form of an "ultimatum," comparing it to actions by Adolf Hitler in seizing territory that led to World War II.

"What Putin demands is to give them a part of our territories, those occupied and not occupied, talking about several regions of our country," he said.

Ukraine's Foreign Ministry called Putin's plan "manipulative," "absurd" and designed to "mislead the international community, undermine diplomatic efforts aimed at achieving a just peace, and split the unity of the world majority around the goals and principles of the U.N. Charter."

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Besides seeking to join NATO, Ukraine wants Russian forces out of its territory, including the Crimean Peninsula that was illegally annexed in 2014; the restoration of Ukraine's territorial integrity; and that Russia be held accountable for war crimes and for Moscow to pay reparations to Kyiv.

Russia launched its a full-scale invasion in February 2022. After Ukrainian forces thwarted a Russian drive to the capital, much of the fighting has focused in the south and east, where Moscow illegally annexed four regions, although it doesn't fully control any of them.

Zelenskyy adviser Mykhailo Podolyak said on social media there was nothing new from Putin and that the Russian leader "voiced only the 'standard aggressor's set,' which has been heard many times already."

"There is no novelty in this, no real peace proposals and no desire to end the war. But there is a desire not to pay for this war and to continue it in new formats. It's all a complete sham," Podolyak wrote on X.

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said at NATO headquarters in Brussels that Putin "has illegally occupied sovereign Ukrainian territory. He is not in any position to dictate to Ukraine what they must do to bring about a peace."

Austin added that Putin "started this war with no provocation. He could end it today if he chose to do that."

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg added that "this is not a peace proposal. This is a proposal of more aggression, more occupation, and it demonstrates in a way that that Russia's aim is to control Ukraine."

Putin insisted that Kyiv should withdraw from all four annexed regions entirely and essentially cede them to Moscow within their administrative borders. In Zaporizhzhia in the southeast, Russia still doesn't control the region's administrative capital with a pre-war population of about 700,000; in the neighboring Kherson region, Moscow withdrew from its biggest city and capital of the same name in November 2022.

Putin said if "Kyiv and Western capitals" reject his offer, "it is their business, their political and moral responsibility for continuing the bloodshed."

The Kremlin has repeatedly aired its readiness for peace talks with Kyiv and blamed the West for undermining its efforts to end the conflict.

Putin went further Friday and claimed his troops never intended to storm Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, even though they approached the city.

"In essence, it was nothing other than an operation to force the Ukrainian regime to peace. The troops were there to push the Ukrainian side to negotiate, to try and find an acceptable solution," he said.

Moscow withdrew from Kyiv in March 2022 and described it a goodwill gesture as peace talks between the two began, but the pullback took place amid fierce Ukrainian resistance that significantly slowed down Russia's battlefield advances.

Putin also claimed that in that same month, he told a foreign official he wasn't ruling out withdrawing forces from the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions and ceding occupied parts of them back to Ukraine, as long as Kyiv allowed Russia to have a "strong land connection" to Crimea.

He said the official planned on bringing that proposal to Kyiv — which Moscow "welcomed," as it generally welcomed "attempts to find a peaceful resolution of the conflict." But the Kremlin then annexed both regions, along with the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces, citing the results of sham "referendums" it staged there. Putin mentioned those and said, "The matter is closed forever and is no longer up for discussion."

In Friday's fighting, Russian defenses shot down 87 Ukrainian drones, the Defense Ministry in Moscow said, most of them launched against the Rostov region, home to Russia's southern military command, but no deaths or damage were reported in one of the biggest Ukrainian drone barrages of the war.

In Russia's Belgorod region on the border, part of a residential building collapsed in the town of Shebekino after Ukrainian shelling, Belgorod Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov said. Three people were injured, he said.

Ukraine's military has been on the back foot in recent months, with its troops outnumbered by the Kremlin's forces and running short of ammunition and weaponry due to delays in promised Western military aid.

Russia has battered Ukraine with drones, especially its power grid. It fired 14 missiles and 17 Shahed drones overnight, Ukraine's air force said. Air defense systems downed all the drones as well as seven missiles, it said.

The attacks injured six people in the Donetsk region, where residential buildings were hit, officials said.

A Russian drone struck a bus near the village of Esman in the northern Sumy region, injuring three

women. Authorities say 20 passengers were in the bus at the time.

Also Friday, Russia returned to Ukraine the bodies of 254 of its soldiers, Kyiv said. Once identified, the bodies will be returned to relatives, according to Ukraine's Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War — Associated Press writers Jim Heintz in Tallinn, Samya Kullab and Illia Novikov in Kyiv, Ukraine, Lorne Cook in Brussels, and Barry Hatton in Lisbon, Portugal, contributed. ___ Follow AP's coverage of the war in Ukraine at <https://apnews.com/hub/russia-ukraine>

Illinois is hit with cicada chaos. This is what it's like to see, hear and feel billions of bugs

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

RIVERWOODS, Ill. (AP) — The ground had seemed to undulate at night, alive with bugs. Crawling cicada nymphs, striving to get higher after 17 years underground, marched en masse toward and up trees, pausing to shed their skin and emerge as adults. And then the fun began.

Cicada chaos is flourishing and flying. Trillions of once-hidden baby bugs are in the air, on the trees and perching upon people's shirts, hats and even faces. They're red-eyed, loud and frisky.

"What you saw was biblical," said biologist Gene Kritsky, who has been chasing periodical cicadas for 50 years, yet was still amazed by the 3 to 5 million cicadas crowding a small patch of Ryerson Conservation Area north of Chicago. "There are things I've seen this time that I've never seen before."

It's an only in the United States spectacle, the last of the triple crown of rare forecasted natural wonders.

First, there was April's solar eclipse, followed by May's Northern Lights unusually far south. Now the great dual periodical cicada emergence of 2024 — an event of a magnitude not seen since 1803 — has burst from below to join the earlier shows in the sky. It's lasting weeks longer than the other two fleeting natural rarities, but in many places the cicada invasion is starting to wind down.

The males are singing for sex and won't stop until they get a female cicada's flapping wing consent. There were places in Illinois the decibel level hit 101, louder than a lawnmower, flowing in waves as an ever-present buzzing drone that seems like aliens descending in a science fiction movie. It is punctuated by bursts of the deeper-toned call "fffaaaro, fffaaaro."

The sound abounds in the suburbs of Chicago, such as Oak Brook, but has already faded farther south in the state, including where two broods overlap. In an asphalt-laden DuPage County shopping plaza, cicadas mobbing the branches of the only tree drowned out the next door automated car wash's whirring hoses and spinning brushes.

David Quinn, visiting the Chicago area from Northern Ireland, said, "whenever we were driving, we were thinking there was something wrong with the car. All that noise. It's the bugs."

Buggy tourism Cicada chasers in 18 Midwestern and Southern states have submitted photos of the bugs to the Cicada Safari app, mostly concentrated in two areas, each an emergence of different broods. The Northern Illinois brood, called XIII and coming out every 17 years, is extra dense, with as much as 1.5 million bugs per tree-covered acre — which is nearly a billion per square mile — in some places like Ryerson, Kritsky said. The Great Southern Brood, which arrives every 13 years, stretches from Virginia to Missouri and southern Illinois to Georgia.

In Central Illinois, especially around Springfield, the two broods just about overlap. But it's hard to tell which brood a cicada belongs to.

At the Lincoln Memorial Garden in Springfield, Executive Director Joel Horwedel figured he'd put up a pushpin map of the United States to track where visitors came from. He wasn't thinking big enough. At the bottom of the map under a scrawl of "Out of USA" are "Japan Belgium Lithuania Germany England Japan (Kyoto)."

"It has been truly incredible how many people we're getting," Horwedel said.

U.S. Department of Agriculture research entomologist Rebecca Schmidt said usually when she gets calls about bugs, it's something bad and scary, like murder hornets. Periodical cicadas are different and "people are coming to us for good reasons, like 'tell us more, we're very excited, enthusiastic about this,'" she said.

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"It's a nice little gateway to these amazing things that the natural world does, some of which we can predict with a lot of accuracy," Schmidt said.

Wearing a T-shirt that says "I survived the cicada invasion and all I got was this shirt (and some ear-plugs)" that she won for posing a cicada on a toy skateboard, retiree Cindy Harris of Springfield walked through the Lincoln Garden pointing out cicadas.

"I don't know why I'm fascinated by them," Harris said.

They're just weird, with powerful jaws and jets of urine and a zombie fungus that sometimes hits them. Cicada fascination Jennifer Rydzewski, an insect ecologist at DuPage County Forest Preserve, donned a cicada hoody costume — complete with bulging red eyes made by a 3D printer — that she wore in an educational social media post and joined a cicada walking tour.

For her video bug gig, she studied how the bugs move.

"You'd go outside and the sidewalks are just covered in them, all of them marching in the night," she said of the still wingless nymphs.

"They're very hunchbacked, just kind of slowly, almost alien-like to me, crawling with all their little appendages," Rydzewski said. But she adds, "they look really cute."

Lily Tolley, a 6-year-old in Springfield, can't get enough of the cicadas. She even feeds them to her pet lizard, Dart. When one came near her front door, she rushed over to her doorbell camera and introduced it, up close and personal. She can tell the difference between the mute females and noisy males, what the cicada parts are and how it feels "a little prickly" when a cicada walks on you. Don't worry, she quickly adds, it doesn't hurt.

Yet many people are scared or grossed out by the trillions of flying bugs that die soon after mating in a rather pungent pile on the ground.

"Creepy crawly animals is probably the most common fear that people have," said Martin Antony, chair of the psychology department at Toronto Metropolitan University and director of its anxiety research and treatment lab.

Long ago, people had to be alert to danger, so there's an evolutionary reason, he said.

"There's nothing dangerous about cicadas but cicadas may share features with other animals that are potentially threatening or carry disease," Antony said.

Helpful, not harmful The only possible danger is to young trees, mostly from when the females slit notches in branches to lay their eggs, Rydzewski said. So many newly planted trees sport white protective netting — a contrast to the black winged bugs lined up on some adult trees.

Overall, cicadas play an important role in the local ecosystem as fertilizer, aerating the soil and food for birds and other animals, said Marvin Lo, a tree root biologist at the Morton Arboretum. He picked up cicada carcasses from one area, ground them in his lab into a stinky powder to measure and test them later.

The arboretum was full of cicadas, cicada-peepers and scientists looking at the bugs. The critters didn't disappoint. They were there in force and weirdness. The Associated Press found a blue-eyed cicada — a one-in-a-million find.

Kritsky also found his first blue-eyed cicada in Ryerson woods. It's a numbers game. Even if they are one-in-a-million, a small plot of land will have a few because there are so many cicadas. The biologist who has written a book on this dual emergence, said the cicada invasion is dying down, but he's still looking for more.

"In about another two weeks it'll be noticeably over," Kritsky said. "It's been a blast."

High orange juice prices may be on the table for a while due to disease and extreme weather

By DEE-ANN DURBIN and TATIANA POLLASTRI AP Business Writer

MOGI GUACU, Brazil (AP) — Orange juice prices have always been volatile, falling when bumper harvests create an oversupply of oranges and rising when frost or a hurricane knocks out fruit trees.

But the record-high prices the world is seeing for OJ right now may be on the table for a while, since

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the diseases and extreme weather ravaging orange groves in some top-producing countries aren't easily resolved problems.

This year's harvest in Brazil, the world's largest exporter of orange juice, is likely to be the worst in 36 years due to flooding and drought, according to a forecast by Fundecitrus, a citrus growers' organization in Sao Paulo state.

"The concern isn't just that the price of juice is going up. The concern is not having the juice," Oscar Simonetti, an orange farmer in Mogi Guacu, Brazil, said.

In the U.S., Florida's already diminished orange production fell 62% in the 2022-2023 season after Hurricane Ian further battered a crop that was struggling due to an invasive pest. Drought also cut Spain's orange production last year.

Scarce supplies have sent prices soaring. In the U.S., a 12-ounce can of frozen orange juice concentrate cost an average of \$4.27 in April, 42% more than during the same month a year earlier, according to government figures.

In the United Kingdom, where the British Fruit Juice Association says supplies are at 50-year lows, the price of fresh orange juice rose 25% over the past year, according to consumer research company Nielsen.

Those price increases are turning off inflation-weary consumers. Orange juice consumption has fallen 15% to 25% in major global markets — including the U.S. and the European Union — over the last year, according to Rabobank, a Dutch bank that focuses on food and agriculture.

Jonna Parker, a principal for fresh food client insights at market research company Circana, said consumers are increasingly getting their morning fruit intake from energy drinks, smoothies and other beverages besides orange juice.

"The price gets high and people consider other alternatives," she said.

Global orange juice consumption was already declining before the current price hikes due to competition from other drinks and public concern about the amount of sugar in fruit juices. If that trend continues, it should help balance supply with demand and keep prices from rising much further, Rabobank said. But it expects limited supplies will keep prices elevated for some time.

In some markets, orange juice is disappearing from shelves altogether.

Late last year, McDonald's in Australia removed orange juice from its menu in favor of an "orange fruit drink" that contains 35% orange juice. The company cited short supplies.

Tokyo-based Morinaga Milk Industry Co. expects to stop shipping its Sunkist brand orange juice — which uses juice from Brazil — by the end of June because of low juice supplies from Brazil, a company spokeswoman said. In April 2023, Megmilk Snow Brand Co., based in the northern Japanese city of Sapporo, stopped shipments of 1-liter (about a quart) and 450-milliliter (15.2-ounce) packs of orange juice, which it sells under an agreement with Dole. Sales haven't yet resumed.

Some companies are considering using alternatives to oranges in their products. Coldpress, a British juice company, introduced a mandarin juice product in February, citing the high price of regular juicing oranges.

But others are tight-lipped about their plans. Several major orange juice makers — including Dole, Tropicana, Florida's Natural, Uncle Matt's and Coca-Cola, which makes the Simply and Minute Maid brands — declined to comment or failed to respond to inquires from The Associated Press.

The roots of the current supply troubles stretch back decades. In 2005, an invasive bug called the Asian citrus psyllid arrived in Florida, injecting bacteria from its saliva into the state's orange trees. The bacteria slowly kills the tree by destroying its root systems. There's no known cure once a tree is infected.

The impact has been devastating. In 2004, before the disease — called citrus greening — hit Florida, the state produced 200 million boxes of oranges. This year, it will produce less than 20 million.

Michael Rogers, a professor of entomology and the director of the University of Florida's Citrus Research and Education Center, said no type of orange tree is totally resistant to greening, but scientists have been trying to breed trees that are more tolerant of it.

Citrus greening arrived in Brazil around the same time as Florida, but it has progressed more slowly there because Brazil has much larger orange groves. Bugs spread the disease by flying from tree to tree, Rogers said.

Still, the disease is spreading. Fundecitrus estimates that 38% of Brazil's orange trees had citrus greening in 2023. Simonetti, the orange farmer, estimates that 20% of his production is affected by greening. Oranges on affected trees don't ripen properly and fall off early, affecting the quality of their juice, he said.

Shifting production to other locations isn't necessarily an option. California grows oranges, for example, and the citrus psyllid doesn't fare as well in the state's climate. But California also doesn't get the rainfall needed for juicing oranges; its oranges are usually sold for eating, Rogers said.

Another issue impacting orange harvests is extreme weather, which is becoming more common as the world warms due to climate change.

Last year, nine heat waves swept across Brazil, resulting in lower output and poorer fruit quality. This year, the impacts of El Niño have been particularly dramatic, with a historic drought in the Amazon and devastating floods in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul.

"The temperatures are high during the day. At night the temperature drops. The plant can't stand this temperature difference," Simonetti said.

Brazil's 2024-2025 harvest is expected to yield 232 million boxes of oranges, down 24% from the prior year.

"We have never seen a harvest like this," Vinícius Trombin, the coordinator of Fundecitrus' crop estimates survey, said.

To make up for the anticipated smaller yield, some producers are considering blending oranges with tangerines to make juice, Trombin said. But he's skeptical.

"The consumer wants an orange juice made up 100% out of oranges," he said.

Parker, of Circana, isn't so sure. She thinks blends with other fruits might help hold down costs and revive consumer interest in orange juice.

"The idea of multiple flavors is very popular and is a way to stand out," she said. "You've got to keep people engaged. Once you lose that interest, it's really hard to get people back."

Converting cow manure to fuel is growing climate solution, but critics say communities put at risk

By DORANY PINEDA and TERRY CHEA Associated Press

PIXLEY, Calif. (AP) — The stench of cow feces, urine and ammonia forces residents to keep windows and doors closed in parts of California's farming country. Some people constantly run air purifiers at home to counter the smell and, they say, fight off air-related ailments.

"We have a lot of health problems going around in this community and most of them are respiratory problems," said Beverly Whitfield amid dairies in Pixley, a small town in Tulare County. She believes her allergies, her adult son's asthma and others' breathing issues are linked to pollution from nearby dairies.

Industrial-scale dairy farms already are among the biggest polluters in the San Joaquin Valley, a premier U.S. agricultural region with poor air quality. Now residents like Whitfield worry methane digesters, which can turn manure into a biofuel that is cleaner than traditional fuels like gasoline, could exacerbate health issues. Biofuel experts say digesters can reduce air pollution.

Dairy and digester capitalHome to about 1.7 million cows, California is the country's leading dairy producer and a large contributor of methane. Cow burps and manure emit the potent planet-warming gas, which over a shorter period is much more powerful than carbon dioxide.

In recent decades, digesters that convert manure and other organic waste into biogas to create electricity or to power vehicles have spread across the country.

The number's expected to grow since waste management practices such as digesters became eligible for funding from the Inflation Reduction Act — President Joe Biden's law to combat climate change.

Most digesters are in dairies that capture methane from lagoons of cow manure and turn it into biofuel. Liquified cow manure commonly is stored in a covered digester where microbes from the animals' digestive systems produce gas. The gas then is cleaned and compressed into a liquid fuel that can be used as an energy source.

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In the last decade, about 120 digesters have cropped up across California and roughly 100 more are in the pipeline. But a technology hailed as a cost-effective way to help the state reach its methane reduction goals has become controversial.

Environmental justice organizations say mostly low-income, Latino communities are dealing with pollution from nearby digesters, and they want California to stop providing financial incentives for more. Critics also say state policies favor industrial dairies, entrenching unsustainable animal agriculture.

Rebecca Wolf with the environmental group Food and Water Watch said the state is incentivizing dairies to keep running large operations that already pollute. "You're never going to stop polluting" with this system in place, she said.

Dairies argue the state's financial program plays an important role. "There's got to be some financial incentive there to give up some portion of your land to operate these systems," said dairyman Brent Wickstrom, whose digester recently went online.

Supporters point to the technology's effectiveness at mitigating climate change. AgSTAR, sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, estimates manure-based digesters reduced greenhouse gas emissions by more than 10 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2022. That's roughly the annual greenhouse gas emissions from more than 2 million passenger vehicles.

Supporters note that biofuel from methane reduces pollution by replacing fossil fuels like gasoline with cleaner vehicle fuel.

"This technology reduces odors and some local air pollutants," said Sam Wade, director of public policy for the Coalition for Renewable Natural Gas. "At the same time, it reduces greenhouse gas emissions."

Dairies, digesters and pollution residents near dairies complain about flies and strong odors.

"You don't want the doors open because you're afraid of all the smells," said Whitfield, whose family left doors open when they moved to Pixley in the 1970s. "Everything's changed now with the dairies."

Some dairies say digester tarps that cover manure reduce smells. "If anything, it should be keeping some of that odor in as opposed to making more," said Wickstrom, the Merced County dairyman.

Studies have found people living near large dairies can experience fatigue, respiratory problems, burning eyes and runny noses if odors are concentrated enough. A 2017 University of Wisconsin study found digesters can increase ammonia emissions by up to 81%. Ammonia may form fine particulate matter that can enter lungs and the bloodstream. Long-term exposure to particulates has been linked to heart and respiratory issues.

"Having a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions is good, but you also want to think about the human health impact," said lead author Michael A. Holly, an associate professor at the Green Bay campus.

California air regulators said the Midwest study doesn't necessarily apply to this state's different meteorological conditions and types of digesters. They added that studies are underway to understand effects of digesters on ammonia emissions.

A recent study funded by the California Air Resources Board found San Joaquin Valley dairy waste emissions contributed little to ozone and fine particulate matter concentrations.

"The air quality implications are basically zero, and really we can make a decision about whether or not digesters should be adopted based on greenhouse gas emissions," said Michael Kleeman, lead study researcher and a University of California, Davis professor. "There's already so much excess ammonia in the agriculture-rich regions that (digesters) are not going to significantly influence the air quality."

Maria Arevalo, a 74-year-old activist and former farmworker, believes her asthma and sleep apnea are linked to pollution from dairies near her home in Pixley. She sleeps with a machine to help her breathe. So do her son, 34, and grandson, 11.

Her neighborhood often smells of ammonia, she said, but many families can't afford air conditioning and open windows to let breeze in. "These dairies shouldn't be in areas where communities are."

In her town of about 4,000 there are more cows than people. According to the nonprofit Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, Pixley's 26 dairies house approximately 140,000 cows. Nine have digesters operating on farms with thousands of animals, according to AgSTAR.

Recently, 15 members of Congress wrote opposing USDA's decision to make some large-scale farming

practices, such as roofs and covers for waste management facilities, eligible for federal funding.

"The storage of hundreds of thousands of gallons of liquid manure ... pollutes the air and water of surrounding communities," they said. "This inherently unsustainable manure storage system is only further entrenched by ... digesters."

Tradeoffs of a climate solution Researchers have found nearly 40% of methane emissions from human activity come from livestock and agriculture. EPA estimates each cow can produce 154 to 264 pounds (about 70 to 120 kilograms) of methane annually.

In California, supporters view digesters as important in helping the state meet climate goals and as a source of renewable natural gas for vehicles.

Biomethane improves air in cities "because trucks don't emit very much emission at all when they run on natural gas," said Eric McAfee, CEO of the renewable fuels and biochemicals company Aemetis.

Joey Airoso, who's had a digester on his 2,900-cow farm since 2018, found that odors declined and nitrogen-rich remnants could be used as crop fertilizer. "That's a big deal environmentally because it alleviates extra nitrogen being put on," he said.

Colin Murphy, from the Policy Institute for Energy, Environment and the Economy at UC Davis, said that while digesters have benefits, they don't solve air pollution "and don't make it any more pleasant to live near one."

Some valley residents who have complained about odors and respiratory issues say they have been told to move. But many have lived in small, rural towns long before dairies arrived — and relocating is not always financially feasible.

"Where are you going to move at? You don't have money to move," said Whitfield, the Pixley resident with allergies.

Micro communities for the homeless sprout in US cities eager for small, quick and cheap solutions

By R.J. RICO and JESSE BEDAYN Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — In a dreary part of downtown Atlanta, shipping containers have been transformed into an oasis for dozens of previously unsheltered people who now proudly call a former parking lot home.

The gated micro community known as "The Melody" doesn't look like a parking lot anymore. Artificial turf is spread across the asphalt. Potted plants and red Adirondack chairs abound. There's even a dog park.

The shipping containers have been divided into 40 insulated studio apartments that include a single bed, HVAC unit, desk, microwave, small refrigerator, TV, sink and bathroom. On a recent afternoon, a half-dozen residents were chatting around a table in The Melody's smoking area.

"I'm just so grateful," said Cynthia Diamond, a 61-year-old former line cook who uses a wheelchair and used to be chronically homeless. "I have my own door key. I ain't got to worry about nobody knocking on my door, telling me when to eat, sleep or do anything. I'm going to stay here as long as the Lord allows me to stay here."

Faced with years of rising homelessness rates and failed solutions, city officials across the U.S. have been embracing rapid housing options emphasizing three factors: small, quick and cheap. Officials believe micro communities, unlike shelters, offer stability that, when combined with wraparound services, can more effectively put residents on the path to secure housing.

Denver has opened three micro communities and converted another five hotels for people who used to be homeless. In Austin, Texas, there are three villages of "tiny homes." In Los Angeles, a 232-unit complex features two three-floor buildings of stacked shipping containers.

"Housing is a ladder. You start with the very first rung. Folks that are literally sleeping on the ground aren't even on the first rung," said Denver Mayor Mike Johnston, sitting in one of the city's new micro communities that offer tiny, transitional homes for that first rung.

More than 1,500 people have been moved indoors through the program, with over 80% still in the housing as of last month, according to city data. The inexpensive units are particularly a boon for cities with high

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housing costs, where moving that many people directly into apartments wouldn't be financially feasible. Both Atlanta's and Denver's program act as a stepping stone as they work to get people jobs and more permanent housing, with Denver aiming to move people out within six months.

That includes Eric Martinez, 28, who has been in limbo between the street and the bottom rung for most of his life. At birth Martinez was flung into the revolving door of foster care, and he's wrestled with substance use while surfing couches and pitching tents.

"It's kind of demeaning, it makes me feel less of a person," said Martinez, his eyes downcast. "I had to get out of it and look out for myself at that point: It's fight or flight, and I flew."

Martinez's Denver tent encampment was swept and he along with the others were directed into the micro communities of small cabin-like structures with a twin bed, desk and closet. The city built three such communities with nearly 160 units total in about six months, at roughly \$25,000 per unit, said Johnston. The 1,000 converted hotel units cost about \$100,000 each.

On site at the micro community are bathrooms, showers, washing machines, small dog parks and kitchens, though the Salvation Army delivers meals.

The program represents an about-face from policies that for years focused on short-term group shelters and the ceaseless shuffle of encampments from one city block to the next. That system made it difficult to keep people who were scattered through the city connected to services and on the path to permanent housing.

Those services in Denver's and Atlanta's micro communities are largely centralized. They offer residents case management, counseling, mental health and substance abuse therapy, housing guidance and assistance obtaining anything from vocational skills training to a new pair of dentures.

"We're able to meet every level of the hierarchy of needs — from security and shelter, all the way up to self-actualization and the sense of community," said Peter Cumiskey, the Atlanta site clinician.

The Melody, and projects like it, are a "very promising, feasible and cost-effective way" to tackle homelessness, said Michael Rich, an Emory University political science professor who studies housing policy. Rich noted that transitional housing is still just the first step toward permanent housing.

The programs in Denver and Atlanta, taking inspiration from similar ones in cities like Columbia, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia, offer a degree of privacy and security not found in congregate shelters or encampments.

Giving each resident their own bathroom and kitchen is a crucial feature that helps set The Melody apart, said Cathryn Vassell, whose nonprofit, Partners For Home, oversees the micro community. Aside from a prohibition on overnight guests, staff emphasize the tenants are treated as independent residents.

Vassell acknowledged it's unclear how long the containers will last — she's hoping 20 years. But, she said, they were the right choice for The Melody because they were relatively inexpensive and already had handicap-accessible bathrooms since many were used by Georgia hospitals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The project, which took only about four months to complete, cost about \$125,000 per unit — not "tremendously inexpensive," Vassell said, but less than traditional construction, and much quicker. Staffing and security operations cost about \$900,000 a year.

The Melody is the first part of Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens' target of supplying 500 units of rapid housing on city-owned land by December 2025. A 2023 "point-in-time" count found there were 738 unsheltered people in Atlanta, far fewer than many cities, but still an increase over the previous year.

"We need more Melodies as fast as possible," said Courtney English, the mayor's chief policy officer.

Few objected when The Melody was announced last year, but as city officials seek to expand the rapid-housing footprint, they know local pushback is likely. That's what Denver faced.

Mayor Johnston said he attended at least 60 town halls in six months as Denver tried to identify locations for the new communities and faced pushback from local residents worried about trash and safety.

"What they are worried about is their current experience of unsheltered homelessness," Johnston said. "We had to get them to see not the world as it used to exist, but the world as it could exist, and now we have the proof points of what that could be."

The scars of life on the street still stick with Martinez. All his belongings are prepped for a move at a

moment's notice, even though he feels secure in his tiny home alongside his cat, Appa.

The community has been "very uplifting and supporting," he said, pausing. "You don't get that a lot."

On his wall is a calendar with a job orientation penciled in. The next step is working with staff to get a housing voucher for an apartment.

"I'm always looking down on myself for some reason," he said. But "I feel like I've been doing a pretty good job. Everyone is pretty proud of me."

Elon Musk gets 77% approval from shareholders to get back his big, \$44.9 billion Tesla pay package

By TOM KRISHER and DAVID HAMILTON AP Business Writers

DETROIT (AP) — Tesla shareholders voted Thursday to restore CEO Elon Musk's record \$44.9 billion pay package that was thrown out by a Delaware judge earlier this year, sending a strong vote of confidence in his leadership of the world's largest electric vehicle maker.

The favorable vote doesn't necessarily mean that Musk will get the all-stock compensation anytime soon. The package is likely to remain tied up in the Delaware Chancery Court and Supreme Court for months as Tesla tries to overturn the Delaware judge's rejection.

Musk has raised doubts about his future with Tesla this year, writing on X, the social media platform he owns, that he wanted a 25% stake in the company in order to stop him from taking artificial intelligence development elsewhere. The higher stake is needed to control the use of AI, he has said.

Tesla also has struggled with falling sales and profit margins as demand for electric vehicles slows worldwide.

But at the company's annual meeting Thursday in Austin, Texas, Musk reassured shareholders that he will stick around, telling them he can't sell any stock in the compensation package for five years.

"It's not actually cash, and I can't cut and run, nor would I want to," he said.

The company said late Thursday that shareholders had voted for Musk's compensation plan, which initially was approved by the board and stockholders six years ago.

Tesla last valued the package at \$44.9 billion in an April regulatory filing. It was once as much as \$56 billion but has declined in value in tandem with Tesla's stock, which has dropped about 25% so far this year.

Chancellor Kathaleen St. Jude McCormick ruled in January in a shareholder's lawsuit that Musk essentially controlled the Tesla board when it ratified the package in 2018, and that it failed to fully inform shareholders who approved it the same year.

Tesla has said it would appeal, but asked shareholders to reapprove the package at Thursday's annual meeting.

A separate vote approved moving the company's legal home to Texas to avoid the courts in Delaware, where Tesla is registered as a corporation.

"It's incredible," a jubilant Musk told the crowd gathered at Tesla's headquarters and large factory in Austin, Texas. "I think we're not just opening a new chapter for Tesla, we're starting a new book."

Musk and Tesla didn't win everything. Shareholders approved measures that trimmed board member terms from three years to one and cut the required vote on shareholder proposals to a simple majority.

Legal experts say the issue of Musk's pay will still be decided in Delaware, largely because Musk's lawyers have assured McCormick they won't try to move the case to Texas.

But they differ on whether the new ratification of the pay package will make it easier for Tesla to get it approved.

Charles Elson, a retired professor and founder of the corporate governance center at the University of Delaware, said he doesn't think the vote will influence McCormick, who issued a decision based on the law.

McCormick's ruling essentially made the 2018 compensation package a gift to Musk, Elson said, and that would need unanimous shareholder approval, an impossible threshold. The vote, he said, is interesting from a public perception standpoint, but "in my view it does not affect the ruling."

John Lawrence, a Dallas-based lawyer with Baker Botts who defends corporations against shareholder

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lawsuits, agreed the vote doesn't end the legal dispute and automatically give Musk the stock options. But he says it gives Tesla a strong argument to get the ruling overturned.

He expects Musk and Tesla to argue that shareholders were fully informed before the latest votes, so McCormick should reverse her decision. But the plaintiff in the lawsuit will argue that the vote has no impact and isn't legally binding, Lawrence said.

The vote, he said, was done under Delaware law and should be considered by the judge.

"This shareholder vote is a strong signal that you now have an absolutely well-informed body of shareholders," he said. "The judge in Delaware still could decide that this doesn't change a thing about her prior ruling and doesn't require her to make any different ruling going forward. But I think it definitely gives Tesla and Musk strong ammunition to try to get her to revisit this."

If the ruling stands, then Musk likely will appeal to the Delaware Supreme Court, Lawrence said.

Multiple institutional investors have come out against Musk's sizeable payout, some citing the company's recent struggles. But analysts said votes by individual shareholders likely put Musk's pay over the top.

Early Friday, Tesla disclosed that shareholders voted for Musk's pay package by 1,760,780,650 to 528,908,419, with about 77% of all votes in favor. The company's shares jumped 3% by the time the markets closed Thursday and were up 1.2% in premarket trading early Friday.

After the votes were announced, Musk began telling shareholders about new developments in the company's "Full Self-Driving" system. He has staked the company's future on development of autonomous vehicles, robots and artificial intelligence.

"Full Self-Driving" keeps improving with new versions, and its safety per mile is better than human drivers, Musk said.

"This is actually going to work. This is going to happen. Mark my words, this is just a matter of time," he said.

Despite its name, "Full Self-Driving" can't drive itself, and the company says human drivers must be ready to intervene at all times. Tesla's "Full Self-Driving" hardware went on sale late in 2015, and Musk has used the name ever since as the company gathered data to teach its computers how to drive.

In 2019, Musk promised a fleet of autonomous robotaxis by 2020, and he said in early 2022 that the cars would be autonomous that year. In April of last year, Musk said the system should be ready in 2023.

Since 2021, Tesla has been beta-testing "Full Self-Driving" using volunteer owners. U.S. safety regulators last year made Tesla recall the software after finding that the system misbehaved around intersections and could violate traffic laws.

Musk also said the company is making huge progress on its Optimus humanoid robot. Currently it has two working at its factory in Fremont, California, that take battery cells off a production line and put them in shipping containers, he said.

Despite laying off the team working on Tesla's Supercharger electric vehicle charging network, Musk said he thinks the company will deploy more chargers this year "that are actually working" than the rest of the industry. In the second half of the year, he expects to spend \$500 million on Superchargers, Musk said.

A peace summit for Ukraine opens this weekend in Switzerland. But Russia won't be taking part

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Switzerland will host scores of world leaders this weekend to try to map out the first steps toward peace in Ukraine even though Russia, which launched the war, isn't attending.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's government didn't want Russia involved. But the Swiss insist that Russia must be involved at some point, and hope it will join the process one day.

The conference on Saturday and Sunday, underpinned by elements of a 10-point peace formula presented by Zelenskyy in late 2022, is seen as a largely symbolic effort on the part of Kyiv to rally the international community and project strength against Russian might.

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But the question looming over the summit will be how the two countries can eventually end the war without Moscow attending.

The conflict has also led to international sanctions against nuclear-armed Russia and raised tensions between NATO and Moscow. The summit comes as Russian forces have been making modest territorial gains in eastern and northeastern Ukraine.

Here's a look at what to expect from the weekend gathering at the Buergenstock Resort on a cliff overlooking Lake Lucerne.

Who's going? Among the stakes will be simple optics: How many countries the Swiss and Ukrainians can draw in.

Swiss officials sent out around 160 invitations. About 90 delegations, including a handful of international organizations like the United Nations, will attend. Roughly half will be from Europe. Zelenskyy led a diplomatic push in Asia and beyond to rally participation.

Several dozen attendees will be heads of state or government, including from France, Poland, Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany and Canada.

U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris is meeting Zelenskyy on Saturday on the sidelines of the summit, and she's also expected to deliver an address.

Who are the major no-shows? U.S. President Joe Biden, who was wrapping up a visit to Italy on Friday for a Group of Seven summit, opted to dispatch Harris and national security adviser Jake Sullivan.

Biden and Zelenskyy signed a 10-year security agreement Thursday at the G7 summit.

Russia's key ally China won't attend. The Chinese Foreign Ministry has said it believes a peace conference should involve both Russia and Ukraine.

The final list of attendees isn't expected until late Friday, and question marks remain about how key developing countries like India, Brazil and Turkey might take part, if at all.

But so far, under half of the 193 U.N. member countries are planning to attend, testifying to a wait-and-see attitude in many capitals.

"Russia does not have a lot of allies in this particular situation," said Keith Krause, a professor of international security studies at the Graduate Institute in Geneva. "It has a number of states that are susceptible to being pressured, and a few that actually wish to stand aside, from what they see as a northern, U.S.-Russia, NATO-Russia confrontation."

What can be expected? Naysayers say the conference will be short on substantial achievements. President Vladimir Putin's government doesn't believe Switzerland, which has lined up behind European Union sanctions on Moscow over the war, is neutral.

Putin said Friday that "without Russia's participation, without an honest and responsible dialogue with us, it is impossible to reach a peaceful solution in Ukraine and in general regarding global and European security." He suggested that the conference is "just another ploy to divert everyone's attention."

Participants are expected to unite around an outcome document or a joint plan, and Ukraine will have a lot of input. But ironing out language that delegations can agree upon is still a work in progress.

Andriy Yermak, Zelenskyy's chief of staff, said that Ukrainian officials wanted countries that respect Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity to be invited. He said the basis of the talks should be a 10-point peace formula that Zelenskyy has presented.

Yermak said Tuesday that Ukraine and the other participants would be preparing a "joint plan" to unite around, "and we're looking for the possibility in the second summit to invite representative of Russia, and together present this joint plan."

What is the Ukrainian 10-point peace formula? Ukraine's peace plan launched by Zelenskyy outlines 10 proposals that encapsulate the president's step-by-step vision to end the full-scale invasion, which began in February 2022.

The plan includes ambitious calls, including the withdrawal of Russian troops from occupied Ukrainian territory, the cessation of hostilities and restoring Ukraine's state borders with Russia, including Crimea.

But Ukraine is unable to negotiate from a position of strength. Moscow's army has the upper hand in

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firepower and number of troops, while Kyiv's momentum has been stalled by delays in Western military supplies.

That is likely why the most contentious elements of the plan aren't being discussed.

Only three themes will be on the table: nuclear safety, including at the Russia-controlled Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant, humanitarian aid and global food security.

Western officials in Kyiv said these themes cut across international interests and are easy for Kyiv to rally the international community around. But they don't encompass the tougher issues that can only be resolved with Moscow as a negotiating partner.

Russia's hesitancy about the conference stems in part from its unwillingness to show any sign of acceptance of the Ukrainian peace formula.

Putin has espoused a deal to be premised on a draft peace agreement negotiated in the early days of the war that included provisions for Ukraine's neutral status and put limits on its armed forces, while delaying talks on the status of Russia-occupied areas.

What's the way forward? Krause, of the Graduate Institute, said that Ukraine needs to emerge from the conference with momentum and renewed commitment from allies on issues like territorial integrity and future relationships — even if NATO and EU membership may be far off.

"I don't think anybody is particularly deluded that this is going to give birth to a new peace plan, or even to some kind of agreement that stops the hostilities on the battlefield," Krause said. "But as past wars have shown, including as far back as World War II, discussions about the contours of the peace begin long before the fighting stops on the battlefield."

Today In History: June 15

More than 1,000 killed in New York steamboat disaster

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, June 15, the 167th day of 2024. There are 199 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On June 15, 1904, more than 1,000 people died when fire erupted aboard the steamboat General Slocum in New York's East River.

On this date:

In 1215, England's King John put his seal to Magna Carta ("the Great Charter") at Runnymede.

In 1775, the Second Continental Congress voted unanimously to appoint George Washington head of the Continental Army.

In 1864, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton signed an order establishing a military burial ground which became Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.

In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an act making the National Guard part of the U.S. Army in the event of war or national emergency.

In 1938, Johnny Vander Meer pitched his second consecutive no-hitter, leading the Cincinnati Reds to a 6-0 victory over the Brooklyn Dodgers in the first night game at Ebbets Field, four days after leaving the Boston Bees hitless by a score of 3-0.

In 1944, American forces began their successful invasion of Saipan (sy-PAN') during World War II. B-29 Superfortresses carried out their first raids on Japan.

In 1960, the Billy Wilder movie "The Apartment," starring Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine, premiered in New York.

In 1985, the Shiite Muslim hijackers of a TWA Boeing 727 beat and shot one of their hostages, U.S. Navy diver Robert Stethem (STEE'-them), 23, throwing him out of the plane to die on the tarmac at Beirut airport.

In 1991, Mount Pinatubo in the northern Philippines exploded in one of the biggest volcanic eruptions of the 20th century, killing about 800 people.

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In 1996, Ella Fitzgerald, the "first lady of song," died in Beverly Hills, California, at age 79.

In 2002, an asteroid with a diameter of between 50 and 120 yards narrowly missed the Earth by 75,000 miles — less than a third of the distance to the moon.

In 2018, former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort was jailed to await two criminal trials; a federal judge revoked his house arrest over allegations of witness tampering in special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation. (Manafort would be sentenced to more than seven years in prison on federal charges, but was eventually pardoned by then-President Donald Trump.)

In 2020, the Supreme Court, in a 6-3 decision, ruled that a landmark civil rights law protects gay, lesbian and transgender people from discrimination in employment.

In 2022, John Hinckley Jr., who shot and wounded President Ronald Reagan in 1981, was freed from court oversight, officially concluding decades of supervision by legal and mental health professionals.

Today's Birthdays: R&B singer Ruby Nash Garnett (Ruby and the Romantics) is 90. Funk musician Leo Nocentelli (The Meters) is 78. Actor Simon Callow is 75. Singer Russell Hitchcock (Air Supply) is 75. Rock singer Steve Walsh is 73. Chinese President Xi Jinping (shee jihn-peeng) is 71. Actor-comedian Jim Belushi is 70. Country singer Terri Gibbs is 70. Actor Julie Hagerty is 69. Actor Polly Draper is 69. Rock musician Brad Gillis (Night Ranger) is 67. Baseball Hall of Famer Wade Boggs is 66. Actor Eileen Davidson is 65. Actor Helen Hunt is 61. Rock musician Scott Rockenfield (Queensryche) is 61. Actor Courteney Cox is 60. Country musician Michael Britt (Lonestar) is 58. Actor-rapper Ice Cube is 55. Actor Leah Remini is 54. Actor Jake Busey is 53. Actor Neil Patrick Harris is 51. Actor Greg Vaughan is 51. Actor Elizabeth Reaser is 49. Rock singer Dryden Mitchell (Alien Ant Farm) is 48. Former child actor Christopher Castile is 44. Rock musician Billy Martin (Good Charlotte) is 43. Actor Jordi Vilasuso is 43. Rock musician Wayne Sermon (Imagine Dragons) is 40. Actor Denzel Whitaker is 34. Olympic gold medal gymnast Madison Kocian is 27. Actor Sterling Jerins is 20.